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Teaching Reading: Exploring Teachers' Perspectives

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines teachers' perceptions of the key and vital components of a division one reading program as well as the conditions the teachers believe are necessary for an effective program, including teacher education and professional development, formal and informal mentorship, classroom environment, and classroom resources and supports. Most of the research into the teaching of reading has focused on the reading method or on the texts and materials used rather than what teachers do in the classroom. This qualitative study, based on the social constructivist theory, has sought to address this omission by listening to and recording the ideas, viewpoints, and beliefs expressed by teachers on their reading instructional practices. To accomplish this I held a focus group discussion and conducted three sets of interviews with three primary grade teachers from northern Alberta. The findings are clustered under the following themes: (a) key instructional elements that experienced teachers believed were necessary for reading instruction, (b) the necessary environment for reading instruction organized under Brian Cambourne's "Eight Conditions for Learning" (c) the issues and concerns identified by the experienced teachers of reading. These findings have implications for the ways universities develop and deliver relevant, up-to-date curriculum and technology instruction. It suggests that school boards must look for ways of providing professional development that is both current and comprehensive. It indicates that school administrators need to provide classroom and library resources, time for teacher collaboration, and support from professionals such as speech pathologists. And it means that provincial governments must re-examine curriculum to make sure it is both manageable and relevant. Recommendations for further research include: tapping

teachers' perspectives, computer use in schools, teacher professional development, and age of school entry.

This Dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my father,

Walter Skitsko

who always said, “Get an education”

and to my caring and kind-hearted mother,

Irene Skitsko

who shows me Christ’s love every day

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The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom - Proverbs 9:10

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

My interest in exploring teachers' perspectives on what constitutes a sound reading program grew out of twenty years of teaching in division one (kindergarten to grade three) classrooms and my search for ways to improve my teaching skills and my knowledge of reading instruction. My monthly meetings with principals often centered on children who struggled in class or on communication issues with parents. Conversations in the staff room with my fellow teachers were often about discipline problems, time pressure, or report cards. Because of the demands of teaching I had little time to problem-solve or exchange ideas with my colleagues on reading instruction.

When I began teaching at the University of Alberta Child Study Center I enjoyed the collaboration that I had with my teaching assistants (also called teaching partners). I usually had two or three teaching partners, who were either University students who worked part time at the Center or women who had taken the Grant MacEwan Community College course in Early Childhood Development. Instead of teaching five days a week, we taught longer hours stretched over four days. This gave us one day a week to plan, to discuss issues and problems, and to set up the classroom. We spent the first half of the day talking and planning our week. These discussions were springboards for my learning. I relished the exchange of ideas, the problem solving, and the questions that challenged my thinking and teaching practices. It was these conversations, I believe, that made me a better, more aware, and more open-minded teacher. They also gave me the motivation to learn more about what constitutes sound reading practices.

I have always had a deep interest in reading and writing instruction. I found that many children struggled to learn to read and many times I was at a loss as to how to help them. It was because of these children that I went back to university to do a masters degree in reading and then a doctorate in instructional studies. As I pondered the direction my research into reading instruction might follow, I remembered how much I enjoyed conversations with my teaching partners at the University of Alberta Child Study Center and I decided to seek out other teachers to see what I might gain from their experience and knowledge on this topic. I also wanted to explore the 'balanced literacy' programs offered by many school districts in Canada.

The questions in this dissertation grew out of my musings on what I thought was important in my teaching. I had been teaching long enough to experience the "reading wars" and the dissonance created by them. During my teaching career I have taught phonics, used basal readers, experienced the Whole Language movement, and taken *Balanced Literacy* (Brailsford, 2002) training. Instinctively, I understood that I needed to know more than reading programs or instructional methods. As a result I began my doctoral program because I wanted to explore the important issues in reading instruction including the instructional components of reading and the "Eight Conditions for Learning" put forward by Cambourne (1988).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the reflections of three primary reading teachers on the fundamental components of a division one reading program based on their experiences. From this study, I hoped to develop an understanding of the ways in which teachers think about the teaching of reading, the instructional strategies and activities they select to teach reading, the ways in which they organize their classrooms, and the beliefs and values that guide their instruction.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What instructional elements do the three experienced teachers believe are necessary for the successful teaching of reading in the primary grades?
2. What do these experienced teachers believe constitute a necessary environment for the teaching of reading in primary grade classrooms?
3. What issues/concerns related to the teaching of reading are identified by these experienced teachers?

Researchers must define terms so that readers can understand the context in which the words are being used or understand their unusual or restricted meanings (Castetter & Heisler, 1977). Wilkinson (1991) states, "Scientists have sharply defined terms with which to think clearly about their research and to communicate their findings and ideas accurately" (p. 22). I define experienced teachers as those teachers who have five or more years of classroom experience in primary (kindergarten to grade three) grades. They have also pursued additional education or training in reading such as professional development in a balanced literacy program or *First Steps* program.

Significance and Need for the Study

Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society, the latest report of the International Adult Literacy Survey (Statistics Canada, 1998), defines literacy as more than knowing how to read, write, or calculate. It describes literacy as understanding text and being able to use information effectively in order to function in a knowledge-based environment. Literacy is also a key component in the education levels reached by individuals. Osberg (2000), in an analysis of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), found that education had a significant impact on income. He concludes that "much of the economic return yielded by education is due to literacy skills—perhaps as much as 40%-45%" (p. 8).

The government of Canada maintains that 42% of Canadians, aged 16 to 65 do not have the literacy skills required for full participation in a knowledge economy (Rootman & Ronson, 2005). The government, as well as school administrators and teachers, are concerned that only 75.8% of Canadian youth graduate from high school (Bowlby & McMullen, 2003). Approximately 11.4% of Canadian youth leave school early, with a greater proportion of male than female dropouts (14.7% vs. 9.2%). This represents approximately 137 000 youths a year in Canada who fail to complete a basic education.

The Alberta Education web site shows that 78.6% of Alberta students are completing high school in five years (2005/2006 figures). Alberta Education tracked Grade 10 students registered in one district for the 1996-97 school year to find out how many would complete high school within five years. What they found was that 75.5% of students who were reading at or above grade level completed high school within five years, while only 40% percent of students who were reading below grade level completed high school within five years (Compass, 2003). As a result, Alberta Education concludes that "strategies designed to help students who are reading below grade level might be effective in increasing the percentage of students who complete high school within three to five years" (Compass, 2003, p. 1).

Illiteracy rates continue to be problematic not only in Canada but around the world. An increase in technology in the work place requires a more educated and literate population. Cohen (1998) estimates that a single high school drop out can cost $243 000.00 to $388 000.00 (US$) in terms of reduced potential as contributors to society as well as the costs of welfare, unemployment, and other social services. Dropouts are more likely to experience physical and mental health problems, engage in illegal activities, and grow up to become parents whose children have increased risks of experiencing problems in school and dropping out (McCaul, Donaldson, & Coladarci & Davis, 1992).

From these numerous studies, the relationships between literacy, drop-out rates, and the health and economic well-being of a nation are clear. Literacy rates have far reaching effects on a population and it is important that we not only discuss the results of poor literacy but talk about ways educators can improve it. Creswell (1998) says, "The strongest and most scholarly rationale for a study, I believe, follows from a documented need in the literature for increased understanding and dialogue about an issue" (p. 94). If educators are to increase literacy in our country they need to first understand the ways teachers can help students develop and improve literacy. Metz (1978) advises, "We need to know what the schools do, why they do it and with what consequences before we prescribe what they should do differently" (p. xi). Researchers point out the lack of research on understanding teachers and the way they think and conduct themselves in the classroom. Fisher (2001) states, "Most of the research into the teaching and learning of reading has focused on the reading method or on the texts or materials used, rather than on what teachers do in the classroom" (p. 290). Allington (2002), who has studied the practices of exemplary elementary teachers, writes, "…so little research has studied the impact of the quality of classroom instruction on reading development and reading difficulties" (p. 276).

I believe we need to give teachers the opportunity to explain what they are doing in regard to teaching reading, the ways they are doing it, and the insights they have gained during their years as teachers. This is different from studying the "Great Debate", the "Reading Wars", the "Whole Language Debate", and the new "balanced literacy approaches" which all focus on programs and methods.

In Alberta, school districts have adopted programs such as *Balanced Literacy* (Brailsford, 2002) and *First Steps* (Rees & Shortland-Jones, 1994) as a means of solving literacy problems. While solid, balanced and research-based programs are certainly necessary, vital, and crucial to increasing literacy in Alberta and Canada, perhaps other aspects of the literacy problem need to be studied.

Researchers in early literacy development stress the necessity of school readiness programs and early intervention. Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Fletcher, and Escobar (1990) report that at least ten million school-age students in the United States are poor readers. Reading problems occur with equal frequency in boys and girls but reading problems are identified more often in boys at a rate of 4:1. The prevalence of a reading disability has been cited as 20% depending on how a disability is defined and where it is studied (Shaywitz, Escobar, Shaywitz, Fletcher, & Makuch, 1992). Long-term outcomes of early reading difficulties are disturbing. Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, and Fletcher (1996) found that 74 % of students who were poor readers in the third grade remained poor readers in the ninth grade. Juel (1988), in a longitudinal study, followed a group of 54 students from grade one to grade four. In this study she found that the probability that a poor reader at the end of grade one would remain a poor reader at the end of grade four was very high (0.88). Conversely, average readers in grade one are likely to be average readers in grade four. Torgensen (1997) writes that eight out of ten students with severe word reading problems at the end of the first grade, perform below average at the beginning of the third grade.

Wasik and Slavin (1993) argue that because remediation after the primary grades is largely ineffective, more effort should be directed towards the early years of school. They say, "Considering how much progress the average reader makes in reading between the first and last days of first grade, it is easy to see how students who fail to learn to read during first grade are far behind their peers and will have difficulty catching up" (p. 179). Barnett and Escobar (1987) point out that early intervention with disadvantaged students can yield an economic return in reduced need for special education services, reduction in crime and delinquency, increased employment and earnings, and decreased dependency on welfare. Haughey, Snart, and da Costa (2002) studied the literacy achievement of grade one students in ten schools in high poverty areas in Alberta. They looked at small class size, a focus on literacy, and teachers' continuing professional development and found these three factors influenced children's gains in reading and writing as measured by test scores. Some Alberta school boards have responded to this and other research by instituting full day kindergarten programs (Cryan, Sheehan, Weichel, & Bandy-Hedden, 1992).

During the past century many changes in reading instruction have occurred. As part of this study, I asked myself such questions as: What processes do teachers go through to make their decisions? How does the classroom culture contribute to students learning to read? What do teachers do to motivate, inspire, and cajole students into learning to read? How are teachers making children feel safe so that they can take risks in order to learn?

Teachers work alone and rarely visit other classrooms. In the business of teaching, time for reflection, debate, or discussion of teaching methods and practices is scarce. Rarely do teachers collaborate. The amount of time teachers participate in training or education courses after graduating from university continues to be minimal, with teachers usually having two or three professional development days and one two-day teachers' convention a year.

In the literature, we read articles from reading experts and researchers, many who base their findings on standardized tests and statistical evidence. In this study, I wanted to give teachers who are directly involved in reading instruction, a voice and an arena to share their insights, learned lessons, and opinions. Researchers such as Graves (1975) and Goodman (1982) learned a great deal by observing students for a relatively short time. Teachers observe students day in, day out, and may spend a lifetime working with, watching, and learning about children. What have they gleaned from their experiences? Can they offer insights that might increase our understanding and influence our teaching practices? I believe that as teachers make connections between their practices, the already published research, and their philosophies and values, they can contribute valuable insights into the teaching of reading.

Some current popular models of teaching reading follow a prescribed program where the teacher becomes a technician, following plans and procedures. I argue that teachers respond to students and situations, employing a range of strategies that elevates their status to a professional level, and requires deep knowledge of reading and writing as well as the development and cultivation of certain dispositions and the classroom community. It is important that educators and researchers understand and study such teachers and their practices in their attempts to more fully understand successful reading instruction.

In the past, teacher effectiveness in reading has been defined by reading experts, researchers, school administrators, and reading achievement scores. We need to give teachers the opportunity to explain what they are doing in the classroom and why they are doing it. A partnership between teachers and researchers can provide powerful insights into how teachers think and act in regard to teaching reading, and this has the potential to improve teaching practices.

Outline of the Dissertation

This study was designed to give three reading teachers the opportunity to articulate their views on reading practices, explain their strategies, and describe their classroom environments, as well as voice their concerns. Chapter Two contains my reflections as a teacher of reading over the last twenty years. It is the story of my journey as I searched for ways of meeting the literacy needs of my students and it records the lessons I learned from children and other teachers. Chapter Three contains the literature review which includes a brief history of reading instruction over the last century and a review of the literature on reading instruction, highlighting the prominent reading research from the last decade, the controversies surrounding reading instruction, teacher university education and professional development, technology in the classroom, and an overview of Cambourne's *Conditions for Learning* (1988). Chapter Four gives an overview of qualitative research, the reasons I chose this form of research and a brief explanation of the social constructivist paradigm. Chapter Five presents the stories of three primary teachers in a Northern Alberta school district. Chapter Six presents a summary of the research particularly the reading instructional practices of these three teachers and a comparison of the teachers' classroom practices to Cambourne's *Eight Conditions for Learning*. It also includes my final reflections, recommendations, and implications for further study in the field of reading and writing instruction.

CHAPTER TWO

REFLECTIONS ON MY TEACHING JOURNEY

My Early Years

The first book I remember receiving for Christmas was *Pinocchio* (1939)—the Disney version. I was a preschooler—perhaps four or five years old and I would beg my mom to read it to me over and over again. As a young child I looked forward to grade one and was excited when I began school. School was a small white stucco building and my classroom was a large room filled with old oak desks, hard covered books and of course, the old Dick and Jane basal readers. My mother stayed with me the first day of school because I was so shy but from then on I felt like I belonged. I quickly learned to read and I read everything I could.

In the bookshelf of my home sat a set of encyclopaedias with burgundy covers; their names, *Funk and Wagnall* inscribed across their spines. I would sit on the floor beside the bookcase and read about the queens of England, the Wright brothers, a funny animal called a sloth. I also read *Simpson Sears* catalogues, *Life* magazines, and dusty university texts stored in our attic.

I can remember my dad rolling up a Time magazine and carrying it in his hand everywhere he went, eventually settling in his easy chair to read. Indeed, to me it seemed he read everything, everywhere, all the time. When my sister and I visited him in his office, he would read as we played, and I would often pick up a book and try to read it—patterning myself after him.

I grew up in a small town that had three gas stations, two grocery stores, a hardware store, and a small library on its main street. The library, a small stucco building with creaky wood floors, had two small rooms with tall shelves stuffed with hard covered books. My mom took my sister, Mya, and me to that library regularly. I had my own library card and I took out several books a week—books like Enid Blyton's *The Valley of Adventure (1947)*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden (1911)* and Johanna Spyri's *Heidi (1965).* These books had the ability to transport me away on adventures. Laden with a pile of hardcover books I would go to my bedroom, flop onto my bed, and read until the wee hours of the morning. If there were chores to do—and there often were—I would make up some story about all the homework I had and would disappear to my bedroom to read—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Lewis, 1950), Jane Eyre (Bronte, 1847),* or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (Twain, 1876).*

Perhaps the teacher who had the most effect on me was my grade five teacher, Mrs. Brown. Kind and warm-hearted, she read books to us every afternoon—wonderful books like *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates (Dodge, 1865)*. Resting my head on my arms, I would listen intently and then feel heavy disappointment when she put the book away. Years later, as an adult, I returned to those same books to recapture the joy I had experienced listening to them.

I remember every one of my teachers, their names, their manners, the way they spoke to us. Teachers such as Mr. Morris, my high school French teacher, had a profound effect on me. I remember one day he called me over to his desk, looked at me and said, "I think you are a good student". That was all he said but it was enough to inspire me to do better and to try harder. After my high school graduation the natural thing to do was enter university. I took a three year B.A. degree that was a mixture of arts and science courses. Although I entered the arts faculty my love of science compelled me to take several science courses. After I finished my degree I enrolled in the Faculty of Education in the after-degree program. My year in the education faculty was a whirl wind. Not only did I have to take courses in 'curriculum and instruction' and 'policy studies' I also had two sessions of student teaching—one in grade six and the other in grade one.

During both my student teaching sessions I was paired with another student and we worked together as a team. My partner in the grade one classroom was hard working and talented. She had more of an influence on me than my cooperating teacher who did not give us much input and often left the classroom when we taught. I enjoyed working with another person in the classroom and learned a great deal as we talked and planned.

Beginning Teaching Career

I felt ill-prepared to teach when I finished that year and was seriously contemplating taking another year of school to complete my B.Ed. But I was immediately offered a job to teach in a private Christian School. It was the era of the peace movement, flower children, the Beatles, and the Jesus People. The Whole Language movement had not yet begun and educators were using basal readers or the phonics method to teach reading. At the time, I was a member of a church that wanted to start a Christian school in Edmonton. The Christian School movement was strong and growing, with hundreds of schools starting up across North America. Our school was affiliated with the Southern Baptists and Accelerated Christian Education (ACE). ACE offered support to local churches by providing materials, resources, and training sessions for teachers.

Hired to teach grade one, I used a phonics-based program to teach children to read. The program consisted of a resource book that contained short animal stories, fill-in the blank workbooks, and a sight word program. I had a word wall (a bulletin board covered with high frequency words) in my classroom and taught Fry's List of 100 high frequency words. Every alphabet letter was paired with an animal that began with the same letter, with some letters having two or even three sounds and corresponding animals. I told a short story about the animal accompanied by paper puppets attached to Popsicle sticks and set up an ABC chart with each letter sound linked to an animal. In addition, the children and I sang short catchy, rhyming songs for each letter sound.

I began the year teaching the children the letters of the alphabet and then the first of 36 letter sounds. After teaching the letter names and sounds, I showed children how to blend these sounds into words and segment the words into sounds.

Each day I read at least one or two storybooks to the children and then asked them comprehension questions. Part way through the year, when children had learned all the sounds of the alphabet, they began working in small workbooks called *Paces*. They read short, leveled passages on various subjects and answer short comprehension questions. I moved from child to child, listening to them read and helping them with questions.

After a few years our Christian school, frustrated with the flaws of the ACE program, became a more traditional school. Still teaching grade one, I used a basal reading series called *Impressions* that consisted of authentic children's literature, and the same phonics program I had used in previous years, to teach reading. The grade one readers featured an anthology of stories that were leveled and became progressively more difficult with each reader. They were accompanied by workbooks, supplemental books, and related instructional materials. Phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, grammar, and spelling instruction were coordinated with the reading selections. A Teacher's Manual provided detailed procedures for teaching reading skills and strategies.

During these years I was slowly finishing my B.Ed degree taking summer school classes at the University of Alberta. Whole language instruction, based on the work of Kenneth Goodman (1967, 1986), was popular and I took a language arts course where I learned to use "big books" for read-aloud and shared reading. Although I had always read to the children, I redoubled my efforts and read more and made sure that children had time for independent reading every day. Using the whole language approach, I introduced such comprehension strategies such as predicting and setting a purpose for reading.

I introduced journals where children wrote on topics of their choice and used invented spelling to help develop writing fluency. I began a home reading program where I divided books—phonics, older readers, rhyming texts, and pattern books into about several levels. Throughout the whole language years I continued to teach both phonics and spelling as did most of the teachers in my school. As Adams (1990) later showed, teaching of the alphabet letters and sounds is important and the number one indicator of success in reading. Spelling instruction helps children read and enhances decoding and comprehension skills (Haskins, 1997).

To increase children's automatic word identification and reading fluency, I copied the stories from the basal readers on strips of paper and put them in pocket charts. Children chanted stories or parts of stories much like Reader's Theatre today. I also wrote rhyming poems or nursery rhymes on large chart paper and children practiced reciting these as well. The nursery rhymes provide a bridge to literacy because most children know them by heart and can easily link them to written words on a page. I also used pattern books such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?* (Martin, 1983) as patterns for children's writing. Working together the children created class books that I would place in the book corner for children to read.

Together the children and I wrote our own pattern poems and often took our ideas from the McCracken books. McCracken and McCracken (1986) use stories, songs, and poetry to teach writing. I modeled writing short descriptive poems and sentence frames on large sheets of chart paper and then children worked on their own pieces of writing in their journals. In addition to teaching basic high frequency words, I also used the McCracken's *Spelling through Phonics* (1982), which taught spelling using "word families".

During this time I finally developed a philosophy regarding classroom environment. I worked with a wonderful principal who created a great atmosphere for children and staff alike. The staff enjoyed coming to work, and that feeling and attitude spread to the children. Jack sincerely liked kids, had a great connection with them and worked through problems with them no matter how long it took. He had a great sense of humor and enjoyed laughing and having fun. He empowered the teachers on staff to be the best we could be. In our regular meetings he would listen to our concerns, frustrations and successes and pray with us. He had a profound effect on my teaching. Feeling safe and happy I sought to create the same atmosphere in my classroom.

Influenced by a fellow teacher, I tried an extrinsic reward system in my classroom but I soon abandoned it. I quickly learned that it simply did not work because I always had to "up the ante" and give children more and more rewards to accomplish the same end. Instead, I concentrated on creating a community of learners, and giving children specific feedback on their work, spending individual time with those who needed support, and making everyone feel proud of their accomplishments. I enjoyed working closely with the parents and inviting them to participate in the classroom and in their children's education. I wrote a monthly newsletter and short notes to individual families and made phone calls to keep everyone informed of activities and events in the classroom. Many parents volunteered to help in the classroom, read with children, or help with bulletin board displays.

I often found teaching challenging. Many children learned to read quickly and easily, but I could not take credit for their success. They came into grade one with many oral language, reading, and fine motor skills. Others, about 20% of the class, struggled to learn the sounds of the letters or the basic high frequency words or even to listen attentively to a storybook.

After several years at what I will call School A, I transferred to another, larger Christian school that I will call School B. In School A I had a great deal of autonomy and freedom to develop and change my curriculum to the needs of the individual children in my class. No such freedom existed in School B. Although I still read from big books during shared reading and instructed children in writing and high frequency words, I was required to use phonics workbooks and teach children over 30 phonics rules. All the school staff in division one was sent to an in-service based on the *Blended Sight-Sound Method of Learning* (1969) developed by Anna Gertrude Ingham. Ingham had taught school in a one-room schoolhouse in Saskatchewan and developed a strong phonics-based program. The ten-day course consisted of instruction in the phonics rules, jail words (words that didn't obey the rules), and spelling. Ingham suggested the use of learning or literacy centers to meet children's individual needs and provide for individual differences. Centers included a listening center, creative writing center, word recognition center, study skills center, organizational skills center, interest area center, reference skills center, and curriculum topic project area center. In the area of assessment, Ingham recommended observation as the most important and most useful diagnostic device. She also suggested keeping a record of the results of the observations in order to organize the reading program and the use of portfolios to keep samples of children's work.

During the ten day course, we spent much of our evenings making bulletin board displays of the phonics rules. We wrote out antonyms and attached them to a large giraffe, and wrote out homonyms and attached them with paper clips to a large Bristol board clown. Later, I made several file folder games to use during center time.

My school principal believed in maintaining a silent classroom but this did not match my teaching style or philosophy. I had previously arranged children in groups of two or four so they might work together. My principal wanted desks arranged in rows. I wanted to use diverse methods of reading instruction. My principal mandated the strict use of phonics. While I had found using the phonics method of instruction was valuable and extremely necessary for early word decoding and encoding words in spelling and writing, many times good decoders were not reading for meaning. I recognized that I needed to make instruction in comprehension strategies part of my everyday instruction. I also realized that working in workbooks was problematic. Children filled up the workbook pages but had difficulty applying what they had learned outside the workbook. I knew that writing was a much more effective way of motivating children to attend to print and use what they had learned in meaningful ways. I found that reading aloud to children was a powerful motivator in getting children to read more, develop book language, and increase their vocabulary.

I reacted to this principal's controls. I felt strongly that teachers needed the freedom to make decisions that would address the needs of their students and teach in a way that fits their personality and strengths. I also felt teachers were in the best position to know what their students needed in terms of instruction. My predicament was that I was unable to articulate what I believed and what I understood from working with children.

Understanding that the phonics method had limitations, I wanted to learn more about reading and reading research. For this reason, during my second year at School B, I enrolled in an M.Ed degree program at the University of Alberta. Taking mostly reading courses, I took an oral language course where I learned about the research of Loban (1963) and his findings about the link between oral language and learning to read. He showed that children learn language by using it. Heath (1983) advocated that teachers provide many opportunities for children to talk in classrooms because talk is essential to learning. This was a turning point in my teaching career. I instinctively knew that children needed to talk in school and have conversations with peers and with their teacher to make sense of their encounters with reading and writing, but now I had the knowledge and understanding of why it was important.

A reading intervention course based on Clay's (1993) *Reading Recovery* methods was instrumental in my development as a reading teacher. It gave me the tools I needed to work with those students who struggled to learn to read and write. Clay's *Reading*

Recovery program divided instruction for children at risk into four major components: rereading a leveled book, working with letters and/or words using magnetic letters, writing a story and then reassembling it after it had been cut up, and reading a new book. The teacher demonstrates problem-solving strategies and provides support to children as they develop effective reading strategies.

I took the reading assessment courses offered by the university and learned about miscue analysis, developing strategies for at risk students, and phonemic awareness and its importance in early reading instruction. Developing an understanding of phonemic awareness was especially important because I was working with young children. Adams (1990) listed phonemic awareness as the number two indicator of success in reading. I began to concentrate on helping children develop this skill through rhyming songs, poems, books, and games.

Career Middle Years

After two years at school B, I took a job at the University of Alberta Child Study Center where I taught kindergarten for the next eight years. I continued to take courses and I developed ways of integrating literacy into the project work that we used at the Center. We began the kindergarten day with reading books to children—both narrative and informational texts and having conversations around them. The children then went to centers during which time my teaching partners and I circulated, working with individuals and small groups of children. I often worked at the writing table with small groups of children who wrote in journals or in small books, using the language experience approach. It was during this time that I recognized the important and profound link between reading and writing. I noticed that children attended more closely to print when they were writing and often incorporated stories and book language they had heard into their writing. Writing also seemed to accelerate children's development as readers.

I continually looked for ways of incorporating literacy into the different play centers. For example, in the block center we introduced children to environmental print and taught them how to make traffic signs to go with the roads they built out of blocks. In the art center we often used the language approach and had children tell us about their "creations", which we scribed, read back to them and then used as part of the bulletin board display of their art work. In the woodworking center we had children develop plans for their constructions and we scribed their explanations. In that way, every center became a literacy center.

At the end of each day, I read a big book and then taught phonemic awareness, letter recognition, and word families through mini-lessons. I had standard size copies of some of the big books, which I placed in the reading corner. Many times children memorized the books and read them back to the teaching staff or to their parents. During this time I instituted a home reading program with leveled books using the Reading Recovery levels. I also developed a parent guide and an instructional session that set out guidelines for parents when they read the home reading books with their children. The motivation for this was my strong belief that parents needed and wanted to know more about supporting their children in learning to read. Central to the session was the fact that children needed to read to their parents at their independent reading level. Independent reading level is identified as the level at which children can read with a high level of decoding, fluency, and comprehension. At school I regularly read with children in order to keep track of their progress and move them through the different levels of books.

During my time at the University of Alberta Child Study Centre, I had the opportunity to work once a week with an Occupational Therapist, Sarah, who came to work with the special needs children who were integrated into our program at the Child Study Center. Sarah had a huge impact on my teaching career. She worked with children who had difficulty attending or focusing, and she introduced me to fidget toys, special exercises, and sensory integration. Sarah helped other children develop their printing skills through a program developed by another occupational therapist called *Handwriting without Tears* (Olsen, 1998). Sarah introduced the center to the software, *Boardmaker* (EnableMart), which we used to make picture and print cards that facilitated communication with non-verbal children as well as literacy development for all children.

One of the most important practices we instituted was our weekly planning meetings. I usually worked with two or three other teaching assistants and several early childhood students who would come and work at the center for six weeks. Along with the planning we spent time discussing our observations of children's work and behavior, and strategies to support children in their learning. It was a life changing "ah ha" moment for me. These wonderful conversations motivated me to keep reading and searching for answers. I learned a great deal from my co-workers who all had special gifts and talents. From Amy, who was the closest thing I had ever seen to a born teacher, I learned to listen to children and engage children in conversations in order to learn better ways to teach them. Listening also helped me to connect with children and get them onside so that I could more effectively teach them. From Irene I learned the importance of communicating with my staff and parents. Irene was a communicator, eloquent, funny, and endearing. From Gerry I learned the importance of music and movement in teaching and I used it to teach phonemic awareness and rhyming. From using project work I saw how engaged children became with learning as I gave them choices, hands-on experiences and real life, real world assignments. Teaching reading and writing became easier when children understood that reading and writing had a purpose. They were excited to build a museum, write invitations, and make museum signs for the Child Study Center after we had visited several museums on campus. Through project work I introduced reading and writing that was real, vibrant and appealing. Books became a way for children to access knowledge and writing became an avenue for communicating with significant others. These insights became the premise for my M.Ed capping paper.

After teaching for eight years at the Child Study Center, I left and began teaching kindergarten and then grade one in a school district that used a balanced literacy approach. The administrators of the schools where I worked expected all of the teachers to participate in balanced literacy training for two years. Therefore I began attending monthly in-services and working with a reading consultant in my classroom.

Over the years I had developed a certain philosophy about reading instruction. My approach was based on observing children and then planning the instruction based on their needs. I did not follow a single approach but had developed a multi-layered approach to teaching, incorporating different ways of reading instructional strategies—phonological, semantic and syntactic cues. This meant that I taught letter sounds, phonemic awareness, some phonics patterns and word families. I read several books during the day and modeled comprehension strategies.

When I began training I liked many of the concepts of the *Balanced Literacy* (Brailsford, 2002) program. I had used many of the components of balanced literacy such as read-aloud and shared reading for many years and felt comfortable with continuing to do so. However, I had never used a guided reading approach but I liked the fact that guided reading was something I required every day which made it easier to keep track of children's progress. I incorporated comprehension exercises into it so that children were not just decoding but reading for meaning. I put up a "word wall" in my classroom but did not play "wordo", a game much like bingo. Instead I looked for other games that were more instructive. I also began to introduce high frequency words through big books that I read to my students so I could teach these rather abstract words in context. I then modeled the use of these words in writing and had children use them in their writing.

I deeply believed in the value of writing every day because I had seen many children attend to words more closely as they wrote. I felt that we teachers did not write enough with our students. In kindergarten I had children write regularly, even daily in their journals. By the end of the year not only were most children reading, they were writing and had developed hand writing skills. I had previously modeled writing but through balanced literacy I learned to use it more effectively. I began modeling writing every day as I taught different genres of writing. Before *Balanced Literacy* (Brailsford, 2002) I had usually taught children to write poetry, narratives or letters. Using *Balanced Literacy* I began teaching children to write other forms such as persuasive and sequence writing. I began to look for literature that modeled this kind of writing and started a collection of books. Feeling somewhat incompetent in writing instruction I took a graduate level writing course at the University of Alberta, as well as *6 + 1 Traits of Writing* in-services, and read extensively on writing instruction. The *6+1 Traits of*

Writing (Culham, 2003) framework provides a rubric and a common language to refer to characteristics of writing and is used extensively in the schools in Alberta.

While I valued learning more about reading and writing instruction through the *Balanced Literacy* approach, I struggled with many parts of the program. Teachers were instructed to teach each of the components of *Balanced Literacy* within a certain suggested time frame. For example, the text recommended that teachers read-aloud to students for 15 minutes a day, do shared reading for 15 minutes, and work with two guided reading groups for a total of 40 minutes a day as well as teach writing for a total of 35 minutes a day. While I understood the importance of including the different components into my teaching day, I found it difficult to keep to this strict schedule. I tended to teach in larger blocks of time especially when teaching writing. I also liked to respond to the struggles children were having, using my observations to guide my instruction.

I worked hard at organizing literacy centers where children worked independently while I worked with four or five children at guided reading. Although I had worked with literacy centers during my years as a kindergarten teacher, I had walked around assisting children, looking for ways to support their learning. Now I had to supervise children while I was engaged in working with a small group. To help me with this process I read several books and took a course to try and find ways of getting children working independently. I found Diller's (2003) book, *Literacy Work Stations: Making Centers Work*. In this book Diller suggests that teachers group children in pairs rather than in larger groups and teach concepts in depth rather than try to cover many concepts during a session. She also suggests that teachers spend a couple of months teaching children how to move through the centers and how to work together. Although the centers took time to organize and manage, I felt they were a valuable tool in helping children become independent learners. Children worked in pairs and had to help each other solve problems and make discoveries. Children always appeared motivated and excited about the hands-on activities at the centers and their chance to work with each other. The centers were composed of a listening center, a reading center, a computer center, a writing center that included a variety of writing tools, a letter writing center, and a word wall center. I changed centers frequently looking for things that worked and usually incorporated some form of writing into each center in order to monitor children's progress.

Every day I also did "making words" with children. As part of the *Balanced Literacy* program "Making Words" developed by Cunningham and Hall (1994), is an active, hands-on, manipulative activity that teaches children to look for patterns in words. Finding the first few lessons in the book too difficult for the children in my class I used the first 37 word families for my lessons and found this effective.

I had about ten minutes a day to practice "word wall" words but I struggled to teach the required five words in this time frame. Instead of chanting the words, as suggested in the textbook, I taught the words using big books or poems written out on chart paper. I then used these words in "modeled writing" and writing assignments that I gave the children.

We had regular, monthly meetings after school and once a month a reading specialist came and modeled a strategy and then coached me in using the strategy. I found my coach supportive as I plied her with questions and as I asked her for clarification of teaching methods. I enjoyed those problem solving discussions and the one-on-one support I received.

Recently, I was at a meeting at the University of Alberta and I chatted with fellow teachers about reading instruction and the balanced literacy program. The teachers had experience using the balanced literacy approaches in two different districts in Alberta. They shared that they had been reluctant to talk about balanced literacy with others in their school—something I had also experienced. Would we be perceived to be unsupportive of the district and their mandated program if we openly discussed its strengths and weaknesses? I wondered about how we short-changed ourselves by not discussing some of the issues surrounding implementing a program into our teaching. I wondered if we talked openly about our problems, our successes, and our frustrations with implementation, that we might be able to help each other.

I think it is important to be to be a reflective and critical thinker and examine what we do in the classroom. To me, critical thinking involves thinking and rethinking, confirming or rejecting the practices and methods we use in our teaching practice. When I first began teaching at the Child Study Center, I worked with other teachers who had been there for several years. On one particular day the children were not engaged in learning and were fooling around. At the end of the day we sat down and discussed what had happened and ways we could improve. It is important to note that at no time did the teachers blame the children for their lack of focus and engagement. We focused on our teaching practices and organization. Had we adequately planned? Could we have set up the centers differently? We revisited what we had done and brainstormed together until we came up with some solutions. We then went to work changing the configuration of the room and the centers.

That day had an effect on my teaching that I have carried with me into the rest of my teaching. When I taught kindergarten I often sat down with my teaching aides to talk about the day and listen to their impressions, thoughts and ideas. On that day I began to look at myself as more of a problem-solver rather than a deliverer of curriculum.

I have returned to the university many times during my teaching to learn more about reading strategies and instruction, and to discover more about the theories that drive what we do in the classroom. I have also sought to find ways to articulate my beliefs and ideas about the teaching of reading. Over the years I have had supportive administrators who understood me and understood what I wanted to do in the classroom. Along the way I have encountered principals who challenged my philosophy and thinking. In a way they have been a blessing in my career because they have motivated me to find out more, to dig deeper, and to formulate my ideas on the teaching of reading.

My experiences with children shaped and moulded my views and beliefs of teaching. Bobby, a sullen, blond, seven-year old, taught me a great deal. Propping his head on his arms and staring off into space, he refused to do any of the assigned work. I bribed him with my bag of stickers, and punished him with extra work, and missed recesses. Nothing worked until in some profound way, I connected with him.

Personal Reflections

When I gave birth to each of my children I instinctively sought to connect with them and to make eye contact. In the same way that a mother and child or good friends connect, I sought to connect with each student I taught. I know that this is as crucial to my teaching as having deep subject knowledge or being well- prepared.

When my children were young, I taught them to read—even before they began school. They read short, pattern books to me and I read longer story books to them every day. I have pleasant memories of sitting on the sofa, cuddling with them and reading Marjorie Ainsborough Decker's, *The Christian Mother Goose Book of Nursery Rhymes* and C.S. Lewis' Narnia Series. When my son was a young teen, we read the *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) together every night. My two older children always have a book by their bedside and are always searching for good fantasy books, their favourite genre. Books have given my family great pleasure and have forever spoiled movies that have been adapted from books. They are never as good as the book, they all declare. My youngest son on the other hand does not enjoy fantasy books but prefers downloading games off the Internet, visiting the Lego@ website and looking up things on Wikipedia, an online dictionary.

All my children have their own computers in their bedrooms and while their use of laptops have meant less school supplies, it has meant that they spend more time in their rooms and less time gathering together as a family. My children are computer savvy and download music, movies and games, buy stuff off EBay, and post information on Facebook. All of them have their own cell phones and use them to take and send photos and text message.

My husband is a computer programmer and even though he spends his day on the computer he will often go to his computer during the evening. He pays bills, looks up information, and buys things like airline tickets on the computer. He tends to like gadgets and also has a pocket PC for keeping his schedule and holding some favourite books including both the old and new testaments of the Bible and Global Positioning System (GPS) for finding his way around. Though I am the least computer savvy person in my family, I spend most of my evenings and weekends writing on the computer. I look up information and journals, place holds on books in the library, write several emails a day, and write reports and papers. One of my favourite things about the Internet is Mapquest which lets me access street maps. While I still like books, I buy them less and less. I access recipes, encyclopaedias, and dictionaries online.

Conclusion

Most children long to learn to read because it opens up the doors to new possibilities, to independence, to grown-up activities. Just ask a class of kindergarten or grade one students, "Who wants to read?" and hands quickly shoot up. What happens as students grow older? Stipek (1996) proposes that students begin school with optimistic beliefs and attitudes related to reading but that these beliefs decline across the elementary years.

Learning to read is both a mystery and a miracle. As I have observed in the classroom so many times—children's eyes light up, everything comes together and they can read. During the last half of the twentieth century many researchers began to unravel the mystery of learning to read, dedicating themselves to finding ways to teach reading more effectively. I think Pearson (2003) sums up my teaching philosophy when he said:

> We want teachers who use their deep knowledge of subject matter along with knowledge of children's histories, routines and dispositions to create just the right curricular mix for each and all—and we want them to use their inquiry skills to

> alter those approaches when the evidence that passes before their eyes says they are not working. Professional knowledge, deep and broad, is the only basis for flexibility of this sort. (p. 15)

I have discovered that good teaching is more complex than having good classroom management. It is more than filling bulletin boards with posters, labels, classroom rules and schedules. It is more than yearly, monthly, and daily lesson plans. It is more than having the latest technology, a library full of hard covered books, or the latest reading program. Cambourne (2000) articulated this thought when he said,

> The more time I spend on the kinds of research I've described in this column, the more I am convinced that those classroom settings we call balanced are much too complex to be orchestrated and maintained by teachers who are armed only with a mandated, one-size-fits-all set of teaching strategies, activities, or tips. (p. 515)

CHAPTER THREE

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A History of Reading Instruction

The history of literacy education follows a distinct pattern of repeated, almost circular emphases on varying philosophies, teaching techniques, and programs. These patterns of change have been accompanied by extended and acrimonious arguments. Robinson, Baker, and Clegg (1998) write:

> The pendulum metaphor used by Slavin (1989) to describe these movements in literacy education is apt. For instance, in the area of reading education the following scenario often takes place. Attempted new ideas are suggested and promoted as "the answer" to all literacy problems. Comparisons and contrasts are made between the suggested innovations and the current instructional curriculum, with distinct emphasis on how much better the new ideas are. Teachers, parents, and administrators see in the new developments a solution to students' difficulties in literacy and they consequently promote these new ideas. Publishers then "jump on the bandwagon" and begin to publish materials needed to meet the demands of the new approach. Test makers adjust assessment procedures to reflect the changes in the literacy curriculum. Implementation of the new ideas begins, often with little preparation of teachers, in terms of either pedagogical knowledge or adequate instructional materials. Teachers soon begin to realize that the new ideas are not the answer to their literacy concerns and begin to look for different ways

> to solve their continuing concerns. Supposedly new ideas are eventually suggested and the cycle continues. (p. 15-16)

In the first section of the literature review, I present a summary of the history of the teaching of reading. This section illustrates the pendulum metaphor used by Slavin in describing the teaching of reading and the resulting confusion it created over the years for many teachers.

300 BC-1900 AD

The history of literacy teaching goes back about 5 000 years when alphabetic writing, using written symbols for speech sounds, emerged in the Middle East. The Phoenicians, members of a trading nation from the eastern Mediterranean, developed letters that were derived from both pictograms (shapes representing sounds) and letters representing speech sounds. The Greeks who traded with the Phoenicians embraced and modified the Phoenician alphabet about three thousand years ago. The Romans adopted and adapted the Greek alphabet and the English further adapted and modified the Roman alphabet.

The earliest method for teaching reading, called the "alphabet" method or "spelling" method was used in ancient Greece and Rome. Teachers first taught students the alphabet, then drilled them in syllabaries (simple vowel-consonant combinations—ab, eb, ib, ob, ub), and eventually taught them lists of words. This method of teaching was used well into the 19th century in Europe and America (Sadoski, 2004).

During this time, other teachers disagreed with the alphabet method and proposed other approaches. In 1527, the German teacher, Valentin Ickelsamer, wrote an introductory reading book called *The Shortest Way to Reading*. He advocated teaching the isolated speech sounds, learning the letters that stood for them, and then reading by pronouncing the sounds of the letters quickly together. In 1570 John Hart proposed a similar method of teaching reading, which was teaching phonics using speech sounds of the letters rather than their names (Fries, 1962). Nevertheless, this approach was not widely accepted. In 1658, a Moravian educator, Johan Amos Comenius, published the first illustrated reading book for children and this was considered the beginning of the word method (Huey, 1908/1968). Although this method did not replace the alphabet method it began to gain popularity.

In America, primers, reading books with strong Biblical content, dominated reading instruction for about a century. These books used the spelling or alphabet method to teach reading and were eventually replaced in the 1700s by spelling books. The most popular was Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* published in 1783. This book used the alphabet method but also incorporated synthetic phonics (associating sounds with letters and blending the sounds into words). The book also contained a long list of words broken into syllables, as well as verses and fables (Sadoski, 2004).

In 1846 Horace Mann, who had visited European schools, attacked the alphabet method and argued that this approach was "harmful and vexing." The word and phonics methods were beginning to grow in popularity. The *McGuffey Readers*, first published in 1836, consisted of a carefully graded series of readers—one reader for each grade (Smith, 2002). Early editions of the *McGuffey Readers* stressed the phonics method but by 1879 they used both the phonics and word methods. They also contained simple comprehension questions after each passage.

The "sentence method" was promoted by George L. Farnham in 1881. His manual, widely used in teacher training colleges, proposed that sentences were the base unit of expression and should be taught as wholes and later analyzed into words and letters (Fries, 1962). In 1889 Rebecca Pollard, writing about the "synthetic" or "phonics" method, proposed that the sounds of the letters should be taught first. She recommended using songs and mental images (the sound of "r" was associated with a growling dog) to teach reading. Huey (1908) called this method "a crime against childhood that cannot long be suffered" (p. 284). The reading wars raged.

Huey (1908) praised two reading methods. The first, called the "eclectic" or "balanced approach," used a combination of word, phonics, and sentence methods, and provided teachers with many options. Huey also liked the "activity approach", the precursor of the language experience approach that was taught in the schools of Francis Parker, a colleague of John Dewey. It taught children to read and write as they talked about interesting objects. The words and sentences grew out of the children's investigations—therefore literacy grew out of exploration and was not a separate subject. Children were encouraged to write down the words of the objects, and then read them back to the teacher. By going through this process children developed a bank of words they could both read and write. In this method, comprehension was emphasized in the beginning of reading instruction and phonics analysis was introduced later.

In 1890 Charles W. Eliot, then president of Harvard University, advocated the use of children's literature to teach reading. He found through personal research that a high school graduate, reading at a moderate rate, read in 46 hours what most students read in their school readers over six years. He understood the need for children to read more than what was in their school readers. This emphasis on literature combined with the "sentence method" produced the "story method". Teachers read short pieces of literature such as fairytales and folktales that children would read, memorize, and then dramatize. The teacher and students would then analyze the texts into thought groups, sentences, phrases, and words. This story method is the precursor of predicable texts and patterned books that are used today (Sadoski, 2004).

The Twentieth Century

At the beginning of the 20th century reading was starting to be thought of as thinking rather than simply memorization and oral expression, which had been the first goals of reading instruction. This attention to comprehension was emphasized in the sentence, story, and activity methods of reading instruction (Sadoski, 2004).

In America the scientific investigation of reading began in the early twentieth century. During this time the first standardized tests in reading were developed and the scientific investigation into reading processes, methods, and practices began. Thorndike (1917) advocated a change in the definition of reading from a process of sounding out words to an emphasis on comprehension or extracting meaning from the page. The first popular standardized achievement test used in public schools was the *Thorndike Handwriting Scale* (Perrone, 1991). In 1921, Arthur Gates, a professor at Columbia Teachers College, administered a battery of tests to a group of students in grades 3 to 8 that assessed speed and comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and intelligence. He found that there was a "useful distinction between ability to comprehend and rate of reading" (p. 310). Gates constructed the *Reading Survey Tests* for Grades 3 to 8 to assess reading speed and comprehension. This construction of tests for diagnosing reading provided the basis for the eventual establishment of reading clinics (Singer, 2005). One of the findings during these investigations was that silent reading was superior to oral reading in comprehension and speed. As a result, silent reading methods replaced oral reading methods and this change was reflected in professional books and teacher manuals (Smith, 2002). A shift in school reading materials from literary works to more factual material also took place during this period. In 1927, Arthur Gates, wrote a book called *The Improvement of Reading* in which he argued that sight reading was superior to phonics. Shortly after his book was published, Arthur Gates was hired by Macmillan publishers to author a basal reader series based on the whole word method.

Soon after this, Scott Foresman, another large educational publisher, hired William S. Gray, Dean of the University of Chicago College of Education and the head of the National Commission on Reading, to revise its *Elson Basic Readers*. In 1925 Gray had published a report that proposed a program of reading and listed commonly taught skills. During the 1930s Gray began to develop a comprehensive skills model of reading that included the following four components: word perception (sight vocabulary), comprehension, reaction to the author's ideas, and the assimilation of reading material with already existing knowledge. Gray and Leary (1935) were instrumental in objectively measuring levels of difficulty in reading texts. Gray's theoretical model became the basis for the *New Basic Readers* series that featured Dick, Jane, Sally, and their pets. These basal readers were similar to the *McGuffey Readers* in that they were sequenced by grade. Each book had a controlled number of high frequency words that were introduced and then repeated throughout the book and were therefore named the "look-say" approach. The teacher's manual incorporated word recognition skills including analytic phonics and comprehension suggestions such as predicting, finding the main idea, and visualizing. By 1951 most schools in America and Canada were using these basal readers in their elementary classrooms.

In 1955, Rudolf Flesch wrote the book, *Why Johnny Can't Read* as a reaction to the word method of reading instruction. Flesch argued that phonics instruction was the only natural system of learning how to read and that a connection existed between phonics and democracy. He contended that the "phonics method" gave everyone equal opportunity to read. Because of the influence of this book, a resurgence in phonics instruction occurred and with it came phonics workbooks and kits.

During the 1960s many alternatives to the "look-say" method were introduced. The "language experience approach", similar to Francis Parker's approach, incorporated the transcription of students' oral language and then used it in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. "Individualized reading" gave children choice of reading material. The teacher conferenced regularly with students in order to evaluate and instruct them. "Modified alphabet approaches" used additional alphabet characters and diacritical marks to teach the 44 phonics sounds of the alphabet. This alphabet was used to instruct children in basic reading and then was gradually replaced with traditional alphabet letters. "Programmed reading" was an approach where reading instruction was divided into small sequenced steps, individualized, and designed for independent work. The student responded to a statement and then gave immediate feedback. This approach worked well when used with other programs. "The Linguistic Approach", also developed during the 1960s, taught word families (i.e. cat, fat, sat, mat) to beginning readers.

In 1965-66 the United States government began a new wave of program comparison research projects including the United States Office of Education (USOE) Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading Instruction (1967). Bond and Dykstra (1967) coordinated a large scale evaluation of instructional approaches in first grade teaching that included systematic phonics instruction, and meaningful connected reading and writing. The mandate of the USOE study was not only to compare the effectiveness of a range of approaches to beginning reading but also to identify the characteristics of students, teachers, and schools that affected learning to read. The project attempted to answer the following three questions: (1) To what extent are various pupil, teacher, class, school, and community characteristics related to pupil achievement in first-grade reading and spelling? (2) Which of the many approaches to initial reading instruction produces superior reading and spelling achievement at the end of first grade? And (3) is any program uniquely effective or ineffective for pupils with high or low readiness for reading?

The results of the analysis showed that the ability to recognize letters of the alphabet prior to the beginning of reading instruction was the single best predictor of first-grade reading achievement. Bond and Dykstra (1967) wrote that word recognition in nonbasal instructional programs was superior to word recognition in basal programs. However, differences in basal and nonbasals programs were less consistent when measured by comprehension, spelling, rate of accuracy of reading, and word study skills. They concluded that no method was especially effective or ineffective for high or low readiness students. Bond and Dykstra (1967) made two interesting conclusions in the report: combination approaches are superior to single approaches, and reading instruction is amenable to improvement. They further state that reading programs are not equally effective in all situations.

During this time and for the next several years many theories of reading were developed. Code emphasis is consistent with the behavioural theory hypothesized by Skinner (1974) (Pearson & Stephens, 1994). Gough (1972) developed a code emphasis model which postulated that the reading process is linear. That is, letters are recognized first by a visual system, transferred to a sound or phonemic system for recognition, and held until the next letter is processed. Words are recognized and held in the working memory in the same way. Reading is therefore considered to be letter-by-letter and word-by-word recognition. LaBerge and Samuel (1974) emphasized the concept of automaticity in word recognition. They theorized that comprehension comes when readers do not have to expend all their energy on word recognition and can therefore concentrate on processing information. This means that students must first master decoding skills before comprehension is possible.

In the 1970s most reading instruction in North America centered on basal readers that were part of a complete reading curriculum that included phonics and systematic instruction in skills. In addition to the basals, the reading programs often included tests, duplicating masters, and supplementary reading books. Read (1971) studied young children and their understanding of the phonological aspects of language and their ability to use this understanding to make sense of the principles of spelling. Since his study the use of invented spelling has become an instructional strategy in early writing.

In 1969 Jean Piaget, one of the major cognitive theorists, used Schema Theory to explain how knowledge is acquired. Schema theory postulates that learning is a process and we create mental models called schemata. Schema theory emphasizes the connections readers make between text and their background knowledge. Based on this constructivist model many educators now understand that individuals personally construct meaning and test hypotheses as they create meaning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Lauritzen & Jaeger, 1997). Piaget (1969) theorized that these constructions were the same no matter what the culture or the social context.

Chomsky (1972) wrote that children acquire language through immersion in the social environment and that they acquire language naturally or innately. He realized that, because words have multiple meanings, comprehension is more that a series of strung together words. One of the most important activities for building the knowledge and skills eventually required for reading is reading aloud to children. He also said that the amount and choice of reading materials seem to make a difference. When the vocabulary and syntax of the materials are both slightly above children's levels of linguistic maturity, students make the most progress in learning to read.

During the 1970s, the sociolinguistic theories based on the work of Vygotsky came into prominence. The main tenet of the sociolinguistic theories (Vygotsky, 1978) is that thought and language are related. Teachers scaffold children's learning and work within children's zone of proximal development to help them learn. Social interaction is viewed as crucial to children's ability to learn. Reading and writing reflect the community and culture and so they become important in children's ability to learn to read and write. The work of Vygotsky has been pivotal in understanding teaching and learning and has influenced other theorists particularly the social constructivists.

The social constructivist view of learning, posits that human learning is predicated on three assumptions: (1) knowledge is constructed through the individual's interaction with the socio-cultural environment; (2) higher functions such as reading and writing are social and cultural in nature; and (3) knowledgeable members of a culture can help others learn. This perspective notes a social relationship between reading and writing. Heath (1982) studied the preschool environment of students from three distinct socioeconomic communities and found that mainstream students have many advantages when they begin school. They have already been initiated into patterns of literacy behaviour including linking text characters to events in real life and listening quietly to stories read by others. While the social constructivist theories account for variations among cultures and the ways students learn to read and write in different settings, they do have some limitations including the difficulty in testing the theories.

The transactional or reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978; Heath 1983) extends the constructivist theories. The theory postulates that readers create meaning as they read and write, and children read differently according to the purpose for reading. They may read something for enjoyment (aesthetic reading) or for information (efferent reading). Heath (1983) further concludes that it is not simply reading to students that makes the difference in their reading ability, but also enjoying books with them, reflecting on the form and content, developing and supporting children's curiosity, encouraging them to examine print, and inviting discussions on the meanings of words and the world beyond the book. Rosenblatt (1994), who developed the transactional theory, maintains that meaning does not reside solely in the text or in the reader but is a transaction between the reader and the text. That is, when a reader reads a text, the meaning that the reader constructs is different from what the author created or what the reader constructs without the text.

The psycholinguistic theory (process-oriented instruction, meaning approach) grew out of Chomsky's work. It refers to the overlapping area of psychology and linguistics that explores how language is learned and then used. But in the teaching of reading it refers to the "meaning approach" to reading (Smith, 1994).

Goodman (1982) coined the term "whole language" in the early 1980s for an approach focused on the individual child as a learner and a move to create relevant and meaningful experiences in the teaching of reading. Goodman (1986) postulates that oral and written language develop naturally and that language learning moves from whole to part; words are learned before letters and meaning is acquired within the context of reading and writing. He sees comprehension as a transaction between the reader and the text. Researchers describe reading as a process, and reading as meaning-making has become the focus of reading, with high quality children's literature an important part of the curriculum. Goodman's (1972) work on miscue analysis demonstrated that proficient readers use four cueing systems of language in order to construct meaning from text: the semantic, syntactic, graphophonic, and pragmatic systems. Goodman (1994) originally referred to this model as the psycholinguistic model but he now terms it the transactional socio-psycholinguistic model of reading. This model was developed in response to the research on the influence of pragmatics on language use (rules of language use differ according to different social contexts).

According to the psycholinguistic model, beginning readers learn to read the way they learn to speak. Smith (1971) writes, "Almost all children have acquired a good deal of verbal fluency before they face the task of learning to read." This verbal fluency provides "a basis of language that is obviously relevant to the process of learning to read—the written language is basically the same language as that of speech, even if it has special lexical, syntactic, and communicational aspects" (p. 45). They also believe that reading, writing, and oral language are all related processes (Goodman, Goodman, & Hood, 1989).

Sadoski (2004) writes that this more holistic view is a combination of new trends in linguistics and cognitive psychology that also incorporates the educational ideas of Dewey (1938) and others. In many ways it is close to the "language experience approach". The whole-language theorists argue that children acquire literacy best when they are immersed in real reading and writing. These theorists feel that teaching decontextualized skills make no sense especially in grade one (Goodman, 1986). This led to a pendulum swing away from phonics and decoding and toward comprehension and literature-based instruction.

A Balanced Literacy Approach

In 1977 Rumelhart postulated that models of reading can be divided into three categories: bottom-up, top-down, and interactive. Gough (1972) and LaBerge and Samuel (1974), who view reading as beginning with the printed page and proceeding from the visual data to meaning, are proponents of the bottom-up theory or the code emphasis perspective. Goodman (1967) and Smith (1971), proponents of the top-down model (also called the meaning emphasis perspective), see reading as beginning with readers generating predictions or hypotheses about the printed word and then testing these predictions or hypotheses. In the interactive model of reading, Rumelhart (1994) recognizes the reciprocal nature and interaction of both the knowledge of letters and semantic knowledge. Readers read by focusing on letter features and comprehension at the same time. He sees that meaning and syntactic context both have an impact on recognition of letters and words.

The sociocultural view of literacy, developed by the Santa Barbara Discourse Group (1994), postulates that literacy is practiced differently by different social groups. Acknowledging the role of social context in literacy, teachers teach the use of different genres in reading and writing for different purposes and audiences. For example, newspaper reading and writing are different from science fiction reading and writing.

Together, the interactive model of reading and the sociocultural view of literacy form the foundation of balanced literacy instruction. Purcell-Gates (1995) also calls this model "whole-part-whole". Teachers involve students in purposeful reading and writing, and then concentrate on teaching a skill such as decoding, text structure, or comprehension. These skills are then practiced within the context of reading and writing. Acknowledging the role of social context in learning to read and write, teachers instruct students in different genres.

The major components of all balanced literacy programs consist of both skill-based (graphophonic) and meaning-based (semantic and syntactic) instruction. The "word method" of instruction using basal readers such as Dick and Jane readers with their controlled vocabulary is an example of the skill-based method of instruction. The "whole language method" of reading instruction is an example of meaning-based instruction. Balanced literacy programs vary but usually consist of the following components: word instruction (both phonics and high frequency words), reading (guided, independent, shared, and modelled reading) and writing (independent, shared, and modelled writing) in different genres. They also include spelling instruction of high frequency words.

Au, Carroll, and Scheu (1997) and Weaver (1998) suggest that balanced literacy instruction means integrated literacy instruction. Spiegel (1998) describes three characteristics of effective balanced literacy programs: (1) the programs are allied to research, (2) the teachers know why they are pursuing specific teaching practices, and (3) these programs are broad based with comprehensive concepts of literacy (p. 117).

In Brailsford's (2002) *Balanced Literacy* program, children move along a continuum from supported to independent learning in language arts. Growth is accomplished through techniques called: read-aloud, guided reading, independent reading, write-aloud, shared writing, and independent writing. Students also receive direct, explicit instruction and incidental teaching of spelling, word recognition/analysis, and comprehension and writing strategies. All key components in this balanced literacy approach occur daily to ensure the presence of a predictable routine and all approaches are in balance. In addition, direct, whole class instruction is an important part of the process to ensure that all students are exposed to various literacy concepts. Professional development for teachers is intrinsic to the Brailsford program.

Cunningham, Hall, and Sigmon's (1998) model of balanced literacy, often referred to as the *Four Blocks Model*, divides literacy instruction into four blocks of time with daily periods of time devoted to working with words, guided reading, self-selected reading, and writing. The time allotted to word study focuses on sight word recognition, phonemic awareness, phonetic analysis, phonetic analogies, and the transfer of learning into a variety of language contexts. Activities are practical, multileveled, and hands-on.

The guided reading block is composed of shared reading, partner reading, coaching groups, book club groups, and whole class guided reading lessons. In the guided reading lessons the teacher selects one text at instructional level and one text at independent level to read weekly with the students. The self-selected reading block consists of a teacher read-aloud segment and progresses to students' independent reading of a wide range of materials. During the writing block, the teacher demonstrates a writing strategy and then the class engages in *Writers' Workshop* (Graves, 1983; Calkins & Harwayne, 1991) with the students selecting their own topics and progressing at their own pace through the writing stages.

The Four Resources Model (Luke & Freebody, 1997), based in part on Freire's theory of critical pedagogy or critical theory, recognizes and incorporates many of the current methods in reading instruction, shifting the focus from trying to find the "right method" to using a broad repertoire of practices. Luke and Freebody call it a "map of possible practices". They see the teacher adapting the literacy curriculum to the needs and strengths of the learners by using many and varied program components. Luke and Freebody note that students have a collection of linguistic, cultural, and textual practices that is learned from the community, culture, everyday life, mass media, and previous educational experiences. They also suggest finding those books and materials that will meet the culture, gender, and social needs of the learners. It may mean for example, that teachers collect and make available to students multicultural books, books for different genders, and books that address the different social and economic groups of the classroom, school community, or country.

Luke and Freebody (1997) believe that teaching literacy is not a matter of individual skill deficits or even of skill acquisition or knowledge transmission, but is a matter of social and cultural access. Luke and Freebody (1999) write,

> Recently there have been many attempts to draw together research taking into account the kinds of students participating in literacy programs, rather than simply the approach to teaching. A critical point has been that, while students who have a high degree of congruence with the culture of the teachers perform well in various types of programs, students without such congruence perform particularly poorly in "meaning-based" programs.
>
> At the same time, the school-effectiveness and school management fields continue the pursuit of what has become the "holy grail" of instructional psychologists: a single effective or "authentic pedagogy." Regardless of intensive debates over the years about the relative efficacy of various teaching methods, and in spite of the fact that effective teachers have been found to use materials with broadly comparable features, it remains our contention that, within a certain range of procedures, differing teaching approaches work differentially with different communities of students, and that effective teachers know that. (p. 1)

In addition to the cultural and gender influences on learning to read is the influence of media and electronic communication (computer/Internet/CD ROM programs, television). The generation of children currently in school has been exposed to these forms of communication since birth and are conversant in their use well before coming to school. The challenge for schools is to incorporate these technologies into reading and writing instruction. Luke (1997) says:

> To envision what students' alternative media texts and readings might be requires that teachers give up their generally negative attitudes towards television, popular and youth culture, and that they spend time with and develop an interest in the cultural texts, artefacts, and practices that are so important to the age group that they teach. (p. 41)

Teachers need to accept that today's students have grown up with a technological and cultural world that is different from the world of most teachers, and that this culture challenges the linear, text-based curriculum of most schools. As teachers move to understanding the culture and the way which this culture has structured students' knowledge, they will become more effective. Ideally this education should begin in preservice teacher education programs.

Based on the Four Resource Model, the Education Department of Western Australia developed the Western Australian framework for a balanced approach to literacy instruction, called *First Steps.* In Australia, during the late 1980's and early 1990's, there was a growing perception that many students were having difficulties in learning literacy. In addition, during the 1980s, a policy was introduced that "mainstreamed" students with learning difficulties. From these observations and perceptions came a demand by teachers for more professional development on effective ways of supporting and teaching students at risk in K-5. This demand was later expanded in Australia to include students from K-8.

The definition of reading used in the *First Steps* program delineates the following four roles that all effective readers take on: code breaker, text user, text participant, and text analyst. The code breaker recognizes the relationship between spoken sounds and written symbols, the grammar, and the structural conventions of texts. The text user understands that different texts have different purposes that shape the text and can apply this knowledge to comprehending the text. The text participant comprehends the text by drawing on experiences and background knowledge, and knowledge of similar texts. The text analyst appreciates that texts represent the views of the writer, that texts influence reader perceptions, and that texts empower certain groups (Australian Government, Department of Education Science and Training, 2002). One resource used in conjunction with *First Steps* is the *First Steps Parents as Partners* (1995) booklets developed by the Australian Education Department which give support and encouragement to parents. These booklets contain the reading, writing, oral language, and spelling continua, and specific strategies that parents can use at home with their children. The *First Steps* resource includes major teacher professional development initiatives—something that both teachers and the Australian Education Department thought was missing from previous literacy initiatives. The professional development is done individually, with a partner, or in a small or large group. The proponents of *First Steps* recommend that teachers should interact, share ideas, and problem solve as ways of developing shared beliefs and understandings.

First Steps Literacy Leader Courses use the "train-the-trainer" model of professional development. Upon completion of the course, Literacy Leaders are certified as users and providers of ongoing support in at least one of the components—reading, writing, spelling, or oral language—to other teachers in their local schools. *First Steps* Principal Workshops encourage principals to become instructional leaders. School-wide involvement in teacher professional development is a key component of *First Steps*. The school staff develops school-wide implementation plans that provide a clear focus and a framework for evaluation of the program. The authors of *First Steps* encourage schools to:

1. Make sure that the school staff is "on board" with the implementation of *First Steps*
2. Select one or more literacy components (reading, writing, spelling, or oral language)
3. Provide school-wide professional development
4. Train a school-based tutor to provide on-going support to teachers
5. Create school-wide implementation plans
6. Make the principal the instructional leader
7. Access the on-going support offered by *First Steps* (Australian Government, Department of Education, Science, and Training, 2002).

Providing a framework for linking assessment with teaching *First Steps* consists of four resource books and developmental continua: Oral Language, Reading, Writing and Spelling. Reading is constructing meaning from text and is not simply decoding although decoding is a necessary skill for the comprehension of text (Pressley, 2000). Some children use reading comprehension strategies intuitively as they actively engage with the text. They have a "dialogue" with themselves as they predict what might happen next in the story, as they monitor their understanding of the main idea or plot, and as they reread to clarify parts of text that may be confusing. During this process they are always connecting the new information in the text to their background knowledge. This background knowledge encompasses their knowledge of the world, knowledge of self, and knowledge of other texts. As they make these connections they often visualize parts of the text, forming pictures in their mind.

Good comprehension instruction should not only explicitly teach strategies but also give children the opportunity to engage in reading, writing and discussion of text. Unfortunately not all children read for meaning. They expend their energy on decoding or figuring out the words in the text. Or they may rush through a text, unaware of using these strategies.

The *First Steps Reading Resource Book (1994b)* outlines and describes several reading strategies that teachers can employ to teach comprehension. The text breaks down strategy instruction into awareness strategies, monitoring strategies, and adjusting strategies. Awareness strategies consist of topic and background knowledge, level of comprehension, purpose for reading, and different reading styles for different purposes, text organization, text inaccuracies or ambiguities and the differences in explicit and implicit information. Monitoring strategies are the "checking" strategies and include summarizing, paraphrasing, evaluating, critically analyzing and synthesizing information, confirming predictions, and integrating prior knowledge with new text information. Adjusting strategies include re-reading, self-questioning, and substantiating information from the text (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994b).

The *First Steps Reading Resource Book* contains many strategies. Central to *First Steps* is read-aloud, guided reading, shared reading, and cooperative or silent reading. In guided reading, teachers group students according to reading ability. The groups are flexible and small to encourage interaction and to allow teachers to observe individual reading behaviour. After the text has been read, the teacher engages students in discussions about the content of the text and strategies they use to decode and understand the text.

In cooperative reading the teachers promote autonomy, cooperative learning, and belongingness. Teachers explicitly teach reading strategies and then give students many opportunities to use these strategies until they attain competence. The main goal is to engage children in reading.

The *First Steps Writing Resource Book* (1994f) consists of ideas for brainstorming, modeled writing, guided writing, interactive writing, and independent writing. Brainstorming consists of writing down ideas on a topic and then organizing these ideas into a web. In modeled writing teachers demonstrate a writing technique or genre to the whole class, thinking aloud as they write to help students understand what good writers do and how they make decisions about what to write. In shared writing the teachers and students compose a piece of writing together and get children to participate in writing before they write independently. In guided writing, the teacher and students compose a piece together and both share the pen. During independent writing, students write alone or in small groups at their desks. Children have opportunities to choose writing topics and express their thoughts in journals, write reports, or recount experiences. The teachers first scaffold writing, demonstrating different writing genres such as narrative and report writing through modeled and shared writing, before students write independently. The modeling of genres, correct sentence structure, text organization, word usage, and writing gives students the confidence to attempt writing independently. Throughout the writing process teachers encourage students to dialogue (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994f).

First Steps contains four developmental continua for oral language, reading, writing, and spelling that teachers use to inform their planning. They contain indicators or descriptions of behavior that help teachers identify what students are doing as they are learning. This especially helps teachers as they work with students who struggle to learn to read (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994).

First Steps places five major spelling phases, preliminary, semi-phonetic, phonetic, transitional, and independent spelling, along developmental continua (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994d). Teachers are encouraged to teach spelling within the context of real reading and writing and complementary activities such as games, visual patterning activities, identifying critical features of words, word study activities, and word sorts. Spelling is not seen as an isolated language activity but as a thinking process that enables children to become more effective writers. Teachers model correct spelling and spelling strategies during modeled writing and teach spelling during the editing stage of writing.

The word wall consists of grade specific high frequency words displayed on a classroom bulletin board. Teachers use the word wall words as a basis for their spelling program. Students can refer to the word wall for their written exercises. "Have-a-go pads" give students the opportunity to take risks and try out their knowledge of spelling patterns. It encourages children to break away from "safe" spelling and "reluctant" writing. Many times students are able to recognize a word simply by writing it down. Students leave these have-a-go pads on the corner of their desk while they are proof reading and editing their writing and the teacher simply checkmarks the correct word or writes down the correct spelling.

Included in the *First Steps* program are four developmental continua for reading, writing, oral language, and spelling. These continua were developed to provide teachers with indicators or descriptors of children's literacy behaviors that have been taken from research. These continua describe clusters of behaviors that are typical for each phase of development. Although the authors of *First Steps* are quick to point out that children's language, reading, and writing do not develop in a linear sequence and children progress at different rates, they do acknowledge the presence of key indicators that are typical of a phase. The continua therefore provide overall patterns of development that accommodate a wide range of differences (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994).

Strategies for Reading Instruction

The International Reading Association issued a position statement, *Using Multiple Methods of Beginning Reading Instruction* (1999) asserting no single method can teach all students to read. They recommend that teachers must have knowledge of many reading methods. They write that reading is a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires all of the following:

- The development and maintenance of a motivation to read
- The development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print
- Sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension

- The ability to read fluently
- The ability to decode unfamiliar words
- The skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes or speech sounds are connected to print.

Pearson (2001), calling himself a member of the radical middle, explains that he finds both the research base of authentic reading and writing and of explicit skills instruction compelling. He states the following tenets:

- Reading is interactive and the relationships among the reader, text, and content are constantly shifting.
- Most skilled readers have both automatic word identification processes and strong background knowledge that they can use to construct meaning.
- Reading is both an individual process (creating a satisfactory model of meaning) and a social process (influenced by social and cultural factors).
- Reading is the whole point of reading instruction. Students need to be engaged in real reading.
- Skills are essential features of reading and students benefit from teacher modeling and scaffolding.
- Skill instruction is a means to an end rather than an end unto itself.
- Reading and writing are synergistic processes.

Pressley (1998) and Allington (2001) make several recommendations for effective instruction in grade one reading:

- Teach comprehension strategies from kindergarten onward.

- Promote fluency with comprehension. Don't assume that the presence of fluency means students comprehend the texts.
- Integrate reading and writing because each enhances the other.
- Teach phonics and phonemic awareness within the context of real reading and writing.
- Include silent, independent reading as a classroom activity everyday because it increases fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development.
- Read aloud good quality literature to children and make good quality literature available to children for their independent reading. Reading books to children that are above their reading level motivates children to learn to read.
- Provide professional development for teachers. Research supports the teacher as being the key factor in developing competent readers and writers.

Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996), studying effective primary-level literacy, surveyed primary teachers nominated as effective in promoting literacy. They found the following common themes: classrooms filled with print (i.e. in class libraries, charts of stories and poems, signs), story reading, teachers modeling literacy processes, and time provided for reading and writing processes. The teachers had many types of grouping in their classrooms, were sensitive to individual student differences, and gave weaker students explicit instruction in basic skills with most of it occurring within the context of real reading and writing. They used many different kinds of reading experiences including choral reading, shared reading, and read-alouds, and gave their students explicit instruction in writing with many opportunities to write. These teachers motivated their students by making the classroom risk-free, providing positive feedback, and emphasizing the importance of literacy. Students were also held accountable for their learning (i.e. students have a writing portfolio and read to their teachers frequently).

Durkin (1979) writes about the absence of reading comprehension instruction in most classrooms. She discovered that the main comprehension activity consisted of students answering comprehension questions to assess reading comprehension. More recent research including Beck, McKeown, and Gromoll (1989) and Pressley and Wharton-McDonald (1998) demonstrate that reading comprehension is still not taught in most classrooms. The purpose of reading is comprehension. How do we teach students to comprehend more difficult and varied texts? Research from recent decades gives us some strategies.

Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension

Effective reading comprehension instruction requires purposeful and explicit teaching. Effective teachers of reading are clear about their purposes (Dole, Duffy, Roehler & Pearson, 1991). Teachers provide scaffolded instruction in strategies (predicting, thinking aloud, attending to text structure, visualizing, generating questions, and summarizing). Scaffolded instruction includes explicit explanation and modeling of a strategy, and coaching on how to apply it to texts (Hogan & Pressley, 1997).

Effective reading comprehension instruction requires classroom interactions that support the understanding of specific texts. Effective teachers use techniques for enhancing students' comprehension of texts, including discussion, writing in response to reading, and multiple encounters with complex texts. They are clear about the purposes of teacher- and student-led discussions of texts, and include a balance of lower and higher-level questions (Beck, McKeown & Gromoll, 1996).

Effective reading comprehension instruction starts before students read conventionally. These activities include experiences that promote oral language skills such as discussions, retellings, and reading. Reading and rereading a wide variety of texts promote phonemic awareness as well as comprehension (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Snow, Griffin & Burns, 1998).

Effective reading comprehension instruction teaches students the skills and strategies used by expert readers. Expert readers are active readers who use text and their background knowledge to build a model of meaning, and then revise that model as new information becomes available. They also vary their reading strategy according to their purpose and the characteristics of the genre (Kucan & Beck, 1997). Knuth and Jones (1991) define strategies as, any mental operations that the individual uses, either consciously or unconsciously, to help themselves learn. Strategies are goal oriented; that is, the individuals initiate them to learn something, to solve a problem, or to comprehend something. Strategies include, but are not limited to, summarizing, predicting, reviewing prior knowledge, and generating questions.

Effective reading comprehension instruction requires carefully matching the level of text to student's decoding abilities. This holds students accountable as independent readers. Teachers also expose students to higher level texts by supporting and scaffolding their reading (Hiebert, 1999).

Effective reading comprehension instruction builds on background knowledge and vocabulary development. Students are better able to comprehend texts when they are taught to make connections between their background knowledge and the text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Vocabulary instruction involves students actively in learning word meanings, morphology, as well as relating words to contexts and other known words (Stahl, 1998).

Effective reading comprehension instruction should pervade all genres and school subjects. Students need to read in a wide variety of genres—not only narrative, but informational, procedural, biographical, persuasive, and poetic (Duke, 2000).

Effective reading comprehension instruction actively engages students in text. Effective teachers create an environment in which students are actively involved in the reading process. The more students read, the more they comprehend (Guthrie et al., 1996).

Assessments inform instruction and monitor students' progress. Good assessment identifies students' comprehension levels and helps the teacher to evaluate each student's need for support in areas such as language development, strategies, and the application of knowledge (Pearson & Stallman, 1993).

Effective reading comprehension instruction requires that teachers continually engage in professional development (LeFevre & Richardson, 2001). "Every opportunity should be taken to extend and enrich children's background knowledge and understanding in every way possible, for the ultimate significance and memorability of any word or test depends on whether children possess the background knowledge and conceptual sophistication to understand its meaning" (Snow, Griffin & Burns, 1998, p. 219).

The Reading-Writing Connection

Writing involves a complex series of actions. Students have to think of a message and hold it in the mind. Then they have to think of the first word and how to start

> it, remember each letter form and its features, and manually reproduce the word letter by letter. Having written that first word (or an approximation), the child must go back to the whole message, retrieve it, and think of the next word. Through writing, students are manipulating and using symbols, and in the process, learning how written language works (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 14-15).

Studies by Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) and Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Rankin, Yokoi, and Ettenberge (1996) investigated the nature of outstanding literacy instruction in primary classrooms and write that highly effective first-grade teachers use both explicit instruction and thorough integration of reading and writing activities. Many studies record the importance of writing in early literacy development (Clay, 1975; Dyson, 1982; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; Teale, 1986). Clay (1998) states that when students write they must do some of the following:

- Attend closely to the features of letters, learn about letters, distinguishing one from another
- Access this letter knowledge by working with letter clusters and words
- Work with syntactic knowledge
- Use their knowledge of the world to compose a message
- Attend to page placement of text and directional rules
- Work with sequence rules
- Break down the task into its smallest segments (p. 130-131)

Pearson (2001) sees reading and writing as synergistic processes with each benefiting the other. He writes, "this synergy can be seen in all aspects of the processes, from the level of phoneme-grapheme relations (e.g., invented spelling activities benefiting reading phonics) to genre-like features of text (e.g., reading stories to get ideas for how to structure one's own)" (p. 14). In other words, reading and writing are natural partners, each influencing and impacting the other. One cannot be carried out without the other. Smith and Dahl (1984) report that those who read well often write well and that they are often influenced by what they read.

Harste, Woodward, and Burke's (1984) research recognizes the reading-writing connection. They suggest that students expect text to make sense, that they use their background knowledge to understand text, and that they take risks when reading text. Students use their background knowledge of language as a resource for additional experiences with language. Hansen (2001), reflecting on her experiences as a reading researcher, declares that students who were writers expected print to make sense. Because these students created print, they know that writers do not put random words on paper. They come to the pages of books to find out what authors have to say. Graves (1983, 1994) claims that even young students communicate through writing and that they begin to write as they are learning to read. He concludes that writers discover meaning as they write, indicating the strong link between emerging text and thought.

Bond and Dykstra (1967) conclude that reading programs that include a writing component result in higher reading achievement by the end of the first grade than programs that do not include a writing component. Mason, McDaniel, and Callaway (1974) write that students in grade one gain more vocabulary knowledge and comprehension ability if they write regularly. Shanahan and Lomax (1986) say that first and second graders work displays an interactive relationship between reading and writing. Competency in one area transfers to competency in the other area.

Teacher Competencies

Bond and Dyskstra (1967) claim that all the programs they studied worked sometimes but no program worked all the time. They state, “Future research might well center on teacher and learning situation characteristics rather than methods and materials” (p. 123).

Berends, Bodilly, and Kirby (2002) report that when schools adopted one of the U.S. Department of Education programs (e.g. Success for All) no consistent pattern of improvement emerged across all schools, although achievement did improve in some schools. They conclude that what matters is “local capacity”—the teachers and the workplace context. Pearson (2003), writing about the role of professional knowledge in reading reform, argues that reading instruction has been “socially constructed and politically situated” for the last several years in the United States. He worries about the disregard of professional development for teachers and the increasing popularity of scripted programs. Allington (2006), agreeing with Pearson writes,

> A simple principle—children differ—explains why there can be no one best method, material, or program. This simple principle has been reaffirmed so repeatedly in educational research that one would think that folks would have noticed it by now. A corollary principle—teachers differ—has been largely ignored as well even though, again, we have lots of research evidence on the issue. In other words, no teachers are exactly the same. We’ve learned just how hard it is to get teachers to teach “against the grain”: to teach in ways that contradict their beliefs and understandings about teaching, learning, and reading and writing. If you want an intervention to fail, mandate its use with a school full

> of teachers who hate it, don't agree with it, and are not skilled (or planning to become skilled) in using it. (p. 34)

Shulman (1998) argues that teacher education needs a serious scholarship of teaching. To do this there must be a group of people with a set of standards who can critically evaluate how good the scholarship is. Once the scholarship is reviewable it must be generative or in the form where members of the education community can build on each other's work. In that way teachers' work—their creativeness, the coursework they design, becomes public, is critically reviewed by their colleagues, and then becomes a building block in the work of other members of the teacher education community.

Grossman and Shulman (1994) in their in-depth analysis of the pedagogical and content knowledge held by English language arts teachers, state,

> What teachers knew about their subjects particularly what they knew and believed about how knowledge is constructed in a specific discipline, affected how they planned for instruction, how they selected text and organized curricula, and how they interacted with students in their classroom. Teachers need to go beyond their own understanding of the content to understand something about the purposes for teaching English or language arts at particular grade levels, the different underlying philosophies about teaching literature, language and writing, and students' understanding and potential misunderstandings of that content. (p. 12)

Shulman (1986, 1992) in studying what teachers need to know in order to teach well created a "Model of Pedagogical Reasoning", which is composed of the following cycle: comprehension, transformation, instruction, evaluation, reflection, and new comprehension. Comprehension is the ability to understand subject matter.

Transformation is the ability to transform content knowledge into forms that adapt to the students' abilities and backgrounds. It involves preparation of the material, representation of this material in the form of new analogies and metaphors, selection of different teaching methods and models, adaptation of these materials to students' learning styles and tailoring the adaptations to specific students. Instruction includes management, presentations, interactions, group work, discipline, humour, questioning and discovery and inquiry instruction. The evaluation process, an extension of instruction, consists of checking for understanding during and after teaching and evaluating one's own performance and adjusting it. The process of reflection consists of critically analyzing one's teaching abilities and making decisions on what changes need to be made to become a better teacher. Through these acts of teaching the teacher achieves new understanding of students and the subject matter.

According to Shulman (1992), in order to help students learn, teachers need to know about the strengths and weaknesses of learners, understand how to work with special needs students, know about curriculum sources and technologies, acquire and synthesize information, and frame and solve problems. Teachers also have to know about collaboration (both facilitating collaboration among students and collaborating with other teachers) and working with parents.

The International Reading Association (1999) stresses that teachers must view themselves as lifelong learners and continually strive to improve their practice. No one method of teaching reading is a panacea (Chall, 1967) and that no program is a silver bullet (Spiegel, 1998). Children's literacy growth is dependent upon highly informed teachers who can match instructional methods to children's needs. Spiegel (1999) writes,

> A balanced approach requires a clear understanding of a variety of approaches, strategies, and viewpoints. When teachers do not fully understand alternatives, they cannot intelligently implement, modify, or reject them. The more broad teachers' understandings are, the more complete their repertoires will be, and the more successful their balanced approach will be. (p. 18)

A study into effective teaching by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1994) collected data from 11 countries and concluded that teaching quality should be made up of the following key competencies:

1. Knowledge of substantive curriculum areas and content
2. Pedagogic skill, including the acquisition of and ability to use a repertoire of teaching strategies
3. Reflection and the ability to be self-critical, the hallmark of teacher professionalism
4. Empathy and the commitment to the acknowledgement of the dignity of others
5. Managerial competence, as teachers assume a range of managerial responsibilities within and beyond the classroom

This research points to the teacher being a key factor in the success or failure of students in the classroom. If this is so, the next questions we must address is what kind of education are we providing teachers and how do we improve that education? If we know that teacher quality affects student achievement and if we know how to improve teacher quality, it behoves us to pour our energy and resources into seeing this happen.

Universities provide pre-service teachers with basic education in reading instruction. These pre-service teachers read textbooks, learn about theories of reading, and hope to glean enough to take them through student practica and the first years of teaching. Basic instruction in reading is crucial but is it enough? All teachers need a deep knowledge of reading including instructional strategies and theories of reading. Using the data from 1993-94 Schools and Staff Surveys (SASS) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Darling-Hammond (2000) notes that the most consistent and significant predictor of student achievement in reading and mathematics in all years and at all grade levels is well-qualified teachers. Well-qualified teachers are defined as those with full certification and a major in the subject they teach. Darling-Hammond (1999) writes:

> [T]eacher quality variables appear to be more strongly related to student achievement than class sizes, overall spending levels, teacher salaries (at least when adjusted for cost of living differentials), or such factors as the state-wide proportion of staff who are teachers. Among variables assessing teacher "quality," the percentage of teachers with full certification and a major in the field is a more powerful predictor of student achievement than teachers' education levels (e.g., master's degrees). This finding concurs with those of other studies cited earlier. It is not surprising that masters degrees would be relatively weaker measures of teacher knowledge, given the wide range of content they can include, ranging from specialist degrees in reading or special education that are directly related to teaching to fields like administration and others that have little to do with teaching. (p. 31)

Shulman (1987) noted that teachers need a strong knowledge base in order to promote comprehension among their students. This knowledge is taken by the teacher and transformed into pedagogical representations and actions by talking, showing, enacting, or representing. He describes this knowledge base as including: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge (classroom management and organization), curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational contexts (classroom, school, community, culture) and knowledge of educational purposes, values, history and philosophy.

This kind of learning cannot occur divorced from school classrooms or by simply reading and talking about ideas. The best learning occurs within both universities and school classrooms and the provision of talking about and evaluating the results of learning and teaching. Miller and Silvernail (1994) assert the combination of theory and practice is most proactive when questions arise in the context of real students. Darling-Hammond (1994) studied 300 schools of education that extended beyond the typical four-year bachelor's degree program. With these five-year models, students spend the fifth year in school-based internships linked to coursework on learning and teaching. Students in these programs are typically more satisfied with their preparation and principals see them as better prepared. There are other benefits. Senior teachers deepen their knowledge when they act as mentors and the universities and schools work more closely creating a bond between theory and practice.

Teacher Education

Bruinsma (2006) in his study of preservice teacher preparation in Canadian universities writes:

> I have had many conversations with classroom teachers and principals about their perceptions of the preparedness of newly graduated elementary school teachers to teach reading and writing to their students. A frequent assertion from them is that beginning teachers have not been well prepared by universities to teach the critically important literacy components of the elementary curriculum. (p. 99)

As a result of the perception that Canadian universities do not sufficiently prepare preservice teachers to teach the components of a reading and writing program, some school boards employ reading consultants to provide literacy education for beginning teachers. For example, many school boards across Alberta offer multiple in-services in balanced literacy to their teachers.

The International Reading Association (IRA) recommends that teachers should take at least 15 credit hours in basic reading and language arts courses (Berger, 1998). Yet this is not happening in our Canadian universities. In a survey of Canadian universities conducted by Bruinsma (2006) the respondents indicated that about half (52.2%) of the universities that responded to the survey required two one-semester courses in reading/literacy for Elementary Education students in English-Language Canadian universities. Bruinsma also noted that 30.4% of universities required only one one-semester course and 4.3% had no specific requirements.

Hoffman and Roller (2001) report that beginning teachers in the United States have from 3 to 24 semester hours of preparation in reading and writing instruction. A great variation in the requirements for preservice teachers exists. The IRA is calling for a major investment in preparing teachers for teaching reading and writing in the classroom The IRA (2003) standards for teacher education are published on their website. These standards were later adopted by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in the United States. These standards are:

1. Foundational knowledge of reading and writing processes and instruction.
2. Knowledge of instructional strategies and curriculum materials to support reading and writing assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation of reading instruction.
3. A commitment to professional development as a career-long responsibility.
4. Creating a literate environment based on an understanding and implementation of Standards 1-3.

The University of Alberta, Elementary Program route, has a tradition of offering a course for every subject that an elementary generalist might teach. Only one language arts course is required. The decision to have one course goes back to the decision of the university to give each student at least one course in each of the courses they will be expected to teach as a generalist. As a result students take at least one course in language arts, math, social studies, science, art, music and physical education. Often no room exists in the students' program for more than one language arts course unless language arts is taken as a minor.

Is one three-credit course adequate? It would seem impossible, especially with the understanding that reading and writing instruction have become more complex over the last century. It is also important to note that literacy instruction is crucial and foundational to all other subject areas.

The schools in Alberta are now supplementing university education with various programs including balanced literacy instruction and various professional development days. One of the best ways to increase teacher effectiveness is through regular, high quality professional development. Teachers themselves report the more time they spend in professional development activities, the more likely they are to indicate that it improves their instruction (Killion, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Another study also identifies two important factors influencing the impact of professional development on teaching—the extent to which teachers feel their professional development is linked to other program activities at the school, and whether the professional development activity is followed up with school-based activities (NCES, 2001).

Along with a deep understanding of reading, teachers need other skills and attributes. Teacher candidates find that, although the content of literacy courses is not difficult to comprehend, they are expected to apply theory and practice in widely varied classroom settings. The problem solving this requires goes beyond the memorization of facts to the application of ideas in real-world situations (Wickstrom, Patterson & Zeek, 2006, p. 22). Pre-service teacher programs must prepare teachers to adapt their knowledge to novel classroom situations (Daggett, 2004; Iran-Nejad, McKeachie, & Perliner, (1990). Teaching is much more than following a script or a set of predetermined steps. "It requires thoughtful consideration of options, anticipating possible consequences, and holding multiple contingencies in mind as student responses unfold" (Wickstrom, Patterson & Zeek, 2006, p. 27). Mallow and Patterson (1999) developed a reflective teaching cycle. The six phases: personal theory building, planning, informed action, observation and evaluation, reflection, articulating what and why, form a cycle that integrates thought and action and ultimately leads to decisions of what to do.

Pre-service teachers must not only build a knowledge base of child development, language arts curriculum and content, but they must be able to apply their knowledge to real classrooms and real students. To do this they need to be immersed in "complex problems, to learn to see coherent patterns across complex situations, and to choose the most feasible and most productive actions" (Wickstrom, Patterson & Zee, 2006, p. 30). This takes the integration of theory and practice, learning difficult concepts, and the application of these concepts. This is not an easy task that can be accomplished in one or even two literacy courses. As Shulman (1986) states, "those who can, do; those who understand, teach" (p. 14).

Professional Development

Day (1999) defines professional development as both planned and natural learning experiences that contribute to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which teachers acquire the knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence that is essential to professional thinking and working with children. Jackson and Davis (2000) define professional development as the range of formal and informal processes and activities that teachers engage in both inside and outside of the school, in order to improve their teaching knowledge and skills.

Formal professional development experiences can include attending classes or workshops, attending conferences, and visiting other schools. Informal professional development experiences can include regular collaboration with other teachers, joint lesson planning, and reviewing student work.

At least 100 studies in the past decade have documented that highly skilled, highly effective teachers help students learn more. Well-prepared and educated teachers are more effective in the classroom and therefore have the greatest impact on student learning (Killion, 1999). It should be targeted, ongoing, and embedded into a teacher's workday (National Staff Development Council).

The need and value of ongoing professional development for teachers is well documented in the literature (Fullan, 2001; Glickman, 2002). Lieberman and Miller (1999) write about the value of teachers relating to and supporting one another as they commit themselves to continuous learning and improvement. Teachers "discover many new ways to work with students and, in concert with one another, feel enabled to try things, talk about them, shape them, and gain confidence" (p. 62).

Sulzby and Teale (2003) document the effects on the growth of early literacy when emergent reading and writing activities are combined with ongoing professional development for teachers. The 'buy-in' from school administrators and teachers often took at least a year and that improvement in children's outcomes was not evident for two years. Children's performance can even be expected to dip during the first year of a program until the teachers and students become comfortable with new materials and ways of teaching.

Yaden and Paratore (2003) write that an intervention program that requires new ways of thinking and evaluating students often takes more than a year to demonstrate effectiveness. Thus, quick fixes for increasing children's literacy learning and teachers' skills do not exist (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). Short-term teacher training interventions or a new curriculum will not yield long term results without a sustained systematic program of staff development that teachers feel they own. For any program to succeed, the characteristics of the students and attitudes and pedagogical beliefs of the teachers and parents must be considered (Edwards, Dandridge & Pleasants, 2000).

When schools support teacher learning they develop a collaborative culture and teachers develop personal commitment and experience a sense of self-efficacy. Teachers accept that they need to be continually learning (Rosenholtz, 1989). When teachers are successful in implementing new practices, not only does their confidence improves but their job commitment grows (Guskey, 1995). As teachers discover new ways to work with students they feel empowered to try new things, and they gain confidence in their work with students (Lieberman & Miller, 1999)

In *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, the authors, Snow, Burns, and Griffin (2005) identify enhanced teaching education as a key strategy in improving reading instruction. They write:

> In a perfect world, teacher educators would not have to make a case for teacher education. After all, no one asks doctors, lawyers, or engineers whether professional preparation is necessary to become a competent member of their professions. But teachers and teacher educators seem to have to prove the worth of professional education again and again and again. Fortunately, the evidence for the efficacy of teacher education is compelling. Recent studies and reviews of research have shown there is a consistently positive relationship between teacher preparation and student outcomes. (p. 203)

The measures of teacher preparation are the strongest correlates of student achievement in reading and mathematics, even after controlling for student poverty and language status (Darling-Hammond, 1999). "More teacher education appears to be better than less, particularly when it includes carefully planned clinical experiences that are inter-woven with coursework on learning and teaching" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 10).

Sustained and intensive professional development is more likely to have an impact on enhanced teacher knowledge and skills, and ultimately student achievement, than shorter professional development activities (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001). The results from this study also indicate that professional development that is focused on subject matter, provides teachers with opportunities for hands-on work, and is integrated into the daily life of the school is more likely to produce enhanced knowledge and skills that positively impact student achievement.

Numerous experts have studied what constitutes effective professional development (Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2000, 2003; Killion, 1999; Pate & Thompson, 2003; Richardson, 2003; Shulman, 1987; Sparks, 1997). The characteristics that influence the effectiveness of professional development, however, are multiple and highly complex (Guskey, 2003). They include professional development that enhances teachers' knowledge, provides opportunities for discussion and follow-up, is based on research evidence, is relevant, ongoing, collaborative, and embedded in day-to-day responsibilities.

Teacher Collaboration

Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (2000) looked at both school and teacher factors that contribute to children's reading success. They discovered that teacher collaboration within and across grades including team teaching is important. They studied both high-reform-effort and low-reform-effort schools over a three period. In the five high-reform-effort schools they studied, teachers met regularly in study groups where they reflected on their practice and discussed topics over time, met regularly as a whole group, and had an effective internal leadership team. The five low-reform-effort schools did not follow these practices. Teachers in high-reform-effort schools demonstrated more positive perceptions of collaborating in teaching, collaborative professional development, and reflections on their teaching of reading than teachers in low-reform-effort schools. Teacher collaboration breaks down the isolation inherent in the classroom setting, leads to increased feelings of effectiveness and satisfaction, and to "a more elaborate and exciting notion of…teaching" (Popkewitz & Myrdal,1991, p. 35). Collegiality breaks the isolation of the classroom, helps avoid end-of-year burn-out, and stimulates enthusiasm for the job. Teachers become better equipped for teaching. Teacher collaboration also helps with the complex task of incorporating new curriculum or refining existing curriculum. As teachers work together they generate new ideas and implement innovations as well as promote coherence in a school's curriculum and instruction (Little, 1987).

According to Little (1987), schools benefit from teacher collaboration in several ways. Through formal and informal training sessions, study groups, and conversations about teaching, teachers and administrators get the opportunity to become more knowledgeable together. Teachers are better prepared to support one another's strengths and accommodate each others' weaknesses. Working together, they reduce their individual planning time while greatly increasing the available pool of ideas and materials. Schools become better prepared and organized to examine new ideas, methods, and materials. Teachers become adaptable and self-reliant. Schools ease the strain of staff turnover by providing systematic professional assistance to beginners and by socializing teachers to staff values and resources (Little, 1987).

Driekurs, Grunwald and Pepper (1982) contend that the principals set the tone for the school culture. It is this school culture that influences student behavior and ensures that the teachers are adequately supported in their instruction. McAndrew (2005) states that although teachers are positioned to have the best and most complete picture of the school, they seldom share that picture with others. The teachers are the experts and most informed about students. Donaldson (2001) says that the teacher leader is the best solution to the unique difficulties in schools because teachers know schools and students.

Competence and trust are nurtured in an environment in a community where collaboration is the central focus. Kofman and Senge (1995) describe the process of forming a community as "each of us gives up our certainty and recognizes our interdependency within the larger community of practitioners" (p. 40).

Conditions for Literacy Learning

Brian Cambourne (1988), an Australian educator, conducted his research into how literacy learning occurs by observing children's language development in school classrooms for three years. From these observations, Cambourne synthesized his work to form the Conditions for Literacy Learning that consist of eight processes that teachers can use to facilitate students' literacy learning. They are: immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, employment, approximation, and response. Cambourne (2001a) defines immersion as giving students many opportunities to experience both visual print and aural sounds of texts. Demonstrations consist of teachers modeling many kinds of reading through read-alouds and various kinds of writing through think-alouds. Engagement is modeling and communicating to students the reasons for becoming readers and writers. Responsibility is giving over some of the decision-making to students and giving them choices on what and how they will learn. Approximation includes communicating to students the thought that making mistakes is fundamental to learning. Use involves giving students multiple opportunities to develop and apply their reading and writing skills in authentic ways. Response consists of paying close attention to students' approximations and responding to them through demonstrations and feedback. These conditions focus primarily on classroom strategies and the teaching practices.

Summary

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the history of reading including reading research over the last century. The history of reading is fraught with reading wars and pendulum swings. In the early 20th century the scientific investigation of reading that included the measurement of effectiveness in methods and practices spearheaded many changes in reading instruction. In the 1920s and 1930s Gray developed a comprehensive skills model of reading and authored with several others, the *New Basic Readers* basal reading series. These books using the "look-say" approach influenced reading instruction for three decades. During the 1960s, known as the decade of innovation in reading instruction (Chall, 1967), several alternatives to basal readers and programs emerged including language experience, individualized reading, modified alphabets, programmed reading, and linguistic approaches. In the 1980s under the influence of psycholinguists such as Goodman and F. Smith a swing towards a holistic approach, later called Whole

Language occurred. During the 1990s balanced literacy instruction, first developed in Western Australia, found its way into the schools of North America. The major principle of this approach is the inclusion of both meaning-based and skills-based instruction.

Reading theories include the following: code emphasis perspective (Behavioural Theory), meaning emphasis perspective (Psycholinguist Theory), the Integrated Theory, the Constructivist Theory, the Social Constructivist approach, Reader Response, Transactional Model of reading, and the Four Resources Model. Researchers such as Gough, LaBerge, Samuel, K. Goodman, Y. Goodman, F. Smith, Chomsky, Rosenblatt, Heath, and Allington have significantly contributed to our understanding of reading and reading instruction over the years.

In reviewing the research, no clear consensus emerges on the efficacy of the reading theories. The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into reading and writing instruction, as well as into other curriculum areas, is creating a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. Many theorists believe that we are living in the last age of print and the use of hypertexts for most reading is inevitable.

In this chapter I also addressed these issues: teacher competencies and education, teacher professional development, teacher collaboration, student motivation, and gender differences in literacy learning.

Although the International Reading Association (IRA) recommends at least 15 credit hours of basic reading and language arts courses (Berger, 1998), studies by Bruinsma (2006) shows most Canadian universities require pre-service teachers to take only one or two courses in language arts. Professional development, teacher collaboration, and student motivation have all been found to be important factors in student achievement.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative Research

This chapter presents the research design and methodology for this study and discusses the social constructivist paradigm and the role of the researcher. In addition, it outlines the selection of the participants and site, provides a research timetable, and describes data collection and analysis procedures. The study's trustworthiness, member checks and credibility, ethical considerations, confidentiality, limitations and delimitations are also described.

The research design is the overall framework for the study. This "blueprint" is the plan that will be used to answer the research questions and ensure that the answers to the questions are accurate. I chose to use a qualitative research design because I felt it was the best vehicle through which to increase my understanding of teachers' perspectives of reading instruction in the classroom. Rooted in the study of anthropology and history, qualitative research is interested in understanding the meanings people construct about their worlds (Merriam, 1998). Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (p. 1-2). Qualitative research provides a "window" into the world of others and therefore helps us understand this world and the people in it. With qualitative research comes the responsibility to tell participants' stories with attentiveness to detail and respect for the participants.

Janesick (2003) in her essay entitled, T*he Dance of Qualitative Research Design*, compares the qualitative researcher's design decisions to a dancer's three stages of warm-up, exercises, and cool-down. She writes that qualitative research design has an elastic quality and that just as dance mirrors and adapts to life, qualitative design adapts and changes as the study proceeds. The qualitative researcher is like a choreographer who creates a dance to make a statement. For the researcher, "the story told is the dance in all its complexity, context, originality, and passion" (p. 53).

In designing a qualitative research topic Janesick (2003) suggests the following decisions need to be made:

- The questions that guide the study
- Selection of a site and participants
- Access and entry to the site and agreements with participants
- Timeline for the study
- Selection of appropriate research strategies
- The place of theory in the study
- Identification of the researcher's own beliefs and ideology
- Identification of appropriate informed consent procedures

(p. 55-56)

Qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with process, rather than outcomes or products (Merriam, 1998). In my study I was interested in the process teachers go through to make decisions on how they teach reading, how they relate to their students, and the lessons they have learned that help them to be better, more informed teachers. A qualitative paradigm was well suited to my study.

Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning—how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative researchers stress the complexity of humans and their ability to shape and create their experiences. This study, through interviews and a focus group discussion with three teachers, explored their experiences of teaching, the connections they made between their observations and their understanding of good reading practices, and the processes they went through to form a particular perspective or approach to the teaching of reading. The study also looked at how life experiences, interactions with children, and conversations with other teachers impacted the decisions these teachers make in their reading instruction.

The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through a human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines (Merriam, 1998). In this study I collected and analyzed all the data. Qualitative research is descriptive in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures (Merriam, 1998). Through their words the participants in this study created a story about their classrooms and their teaching practice. The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts and hypotheses, and theories from details (Merriam, 1998). For my study I made notes from the details of my participants' conversations about their experiences of teaching reading and searched for patterns to make sense of the data.

Role of the Researcher

Mertens (1998) asserts that in qualitative research the researcher is the instrument for data collection. The qualitative researcher decides which questions to ask and in what order, what to observe, and what to write down. The researcher is an active agent in the research process beginning with the research question. This research question is rooted in something that the researcher wants to know more about (Janesick, 2003).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state, "Even some of the giants of conventional inquiry have recognized that humans can provide data very nearly as reliable as that produced by more objective means" (p. 192). To produce reliable data the researcher responds to personal and environmental cues, collects information about multiple factors, understands the situation beyond propositional knowledge and recognizes those things that are "felt or wished". The researcher can also summarize data on the spot and ask the respondent for clarification or correction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Janesick (2003) addresses the sensitive nature of access and entry into the field of research and the need for the researcher to "establish trust, rapport, and authentic communication patterns with the participants" (p. 211). This is not always an easy process and certainly as a researcher I wondered if the participants were forthcoming in what they believe. Did they feel safe with me? Did they feel that I was there to judge their teaching style or make comparisons? I tried to assure them that I am a teacher much like themselves searching for ways I might improve my teaching practice.

During the interviews and focus group I responded to what the teachers were saying. My questions did not follow a predetermined order. Rather, by responding to what the teachers were saying, I was able to clarify points and adapt my questions to follow new directions in the conversations. This gave me great freedom to explore thoughts and ideas that I had not thought about when designing this study. As a new and inexperienced researcher I did not always foresee the topics discussed.

Of course, the decisions I made about the methodology also reflect who I am as a researcher. This dynamic of self and other is referred to as "working the hyphen" in which the hyphen "both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others" (Fine, 1994, p. 70). I am not simply writing about the participants, I am interacting with them and interpreting what they are saying in light of my own understanding and experience.

Because the researcher is the primary data collection instrument, it was important that I identify my assumptions and biases at the outset of the study. Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (1987) state that the investigator's contribution to the research setting can be useful and positive rather than detrimental. As Tierney and Lincoln (1997) point out, "We are no longer sure if it is either possible or desirable to leave no footprints" (p. vii). I am cognizant of the fact that I bring certain biases, values, and beliefs to the study and that this study can be a reflection of those biases and values. Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (1987) declare that such openness is considered to be useful and positive.

I am a teacher/researcher. I have been a primary grade reading teacher for over twenty years and because of this I can identify with the goals, beliefs, and frustrations of teachers. The capacity to draw upon past experiences and the ability to interact appropriately with the participants are important skills in qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this research I did not see my role as an expert but rather as a fellow educator searching for insights. During the phase of selecting the research participants, I identified my current position in the field, stated the intent of the research study, and described my role in the research process. At the beginning of each interview and continually throughout the study, I worked hard to build and maintain trust with each participant.

The researcher also determines the theoretical framework which is derived from the orientation or stance that the researcher brings to the study. This "lens through which I view the world" determines what I am curious about, what I have chosen to study, and the questions I ask (Merriam, 1998). In this study, I worked within the social constructivist paradigm. A social constructivist's epistemology asserts that it is impossible to separate the inquirer from what she is inquiring about because the values of the inquirer play an important part in the investigation. As Guba and Lincoln (1989) so succinctly put it, "Inquirers are human, and cannot escape their humanness. That is, they cannot by an act of will, set aside their own subjectivity, nor can they stand outside the arena of humanness created by the other persons involved" (p. 88).

Social Constructivist Paradigm

Bateson (1972) states, "All qualitative researchers are philosophers in that "universal sense" in which all human beings…are guided by highly abstract principles" (p. 320). Guba and Lincoln (1989) write that a person's view of the world or paradigm should influence her choice of research methods. A paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded with the socialization of adherents and practitioners: paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate, and reasonable (Patton, 1978). These paradigms serve as touchstones that guide us and are distillations of what we think but cannot necessarily prove (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 80).

A social constructivist paradigm asserts the presence of multiple, socially constructed realities. These constructions are devised by individuals as they attempt to make sense of their experiences which are always interactive in nature. The constructions are usually shared but this does not make them more real; it only means that people generally assent to them (Guba & Lincoln 1989). Knowledge is derived from interactions between people and their environments and resides within cultures. Symbol systems such as language are learned through the learner's life. As learners interact with more knowledgeable others they acquire social meaning of the symbol systems and learn how to use them (Shunk, 2000). Schwandt (1994) states,

> In a fairly unremarkable sense, we are all constructivists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge. Most of us would agree that knowing is not passive—a simple imprinting of sense data on the mind—but active; mind does something with these impressions, at the very least forms abstractions or concepts. In this sense, constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience and, further, we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experiences. (p. 125-126)

Social constructivists believe that knowledge is constructed when people interact with each other and with their environment. Learning is not passive but active and takes place when people are engaged with each other. This not only develops knowledge but thinking abilities as well (Shunk, 2000).

Social constructivism is not without its critics. Critics point out that it cannot stand up the rigors of scientific testing. The relativism of social constructivism or the fact that it focuses on the individual interpretation of a perceived external reality is particularly contentious (Matthews, 1992). In addition, critics claim that social constructivist strategies are not efficient resulting in a trial and error approach (Merrill, 1999). Devitt (1991), one of the most vocal critics of constructivism, writes: "I have a candidate for the most dangerous contemporary intellectual tendency, it is constructivism" (p. ix). As a realist Devitt advocates finding out about the world rather than making sense of the world. Suchting (1992) calls constructivism unintelligible, confusing and "primitive, traditional, subjectivistic empiricism" (p. 247).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) originally discussed the constructivist paradigm under the heading of naturalistic inquiry. They now use the term constructivism and acknowledge that constructivist, interpretive, naturalistic, and hermeneutic are all similar notions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). They elaborate the properties of constructions as follows:

1. Constructions are attempts to make sense of or to interpret experience.
2. The nature or quality of a construction that can be held depends upon "the range or scope of information available to a constructor, and the constructor's sophistication in dealing with that information".
3. Constructions are extensively shared.
4. A construction can be challenged when one becomes aware of new information. (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 71)

The social constructivist paradigm seemed the perfect perspective as I sought to make sense of the ways teachers of young children conduct reading instruction. Social constructivism emphasizes that people develop meaning for their activities together (socially constructing reality). Social reality is then built through talk or discourse as people look for ways to make meaning out of situations or solve perceived problems.

I wanted to engage in conversations about reading and learn from others' perspectives. My wanting to know was more than just curiosity—I sought to improve and grow in my understanding. At the onset of the study I was being taught the balanced literacy approach to reading instruction. I was not surprised when I learned that the teachers in this particular district had been taught the *First Steps* approach, a balanced literacy program from Australia, since balanced literacy seemed the "new thing" in North America. I wanted to have conversations about balanced literacy and to gain more understanding of it.

This "coming together" to solve problems and understand situations was easily facilitated through interviews and the focus group which I felt comfortable doing. Like all other social constructivists I began with a question rather than a hypothesis. What might teachers tell me about reading that I did not already know? I think we can learn from others but the opportunity to do so is not always available. I wanted to know more about reading but from a teacher's perspective. The design of social constructivism is inherently informal which suited me well. I am social and collaborative by nature and seek to learn through dialogue and social interactions. I was also attracted to the inherently limited control over the direction that the research takes as participants come together and talk. In one sense I "sat back" and watched things unfold.

As a teacher for over twenty years I was immersed in the culture of the classroom and I had the background knowledge to understand and assimilate the thoughts, ideas and musings of the teachers. It was easy to connect to the teachers, listen carefully to what they were saying, and understand that their particular experiences were shaping their views on reading instruction. The act of verbalizing ideas is also a learning experience. Some people need to engage in a conversation in order to clarify their thinking and I hoped that would happen for my participants. I earlier alluded to my experience of knowing what I believed about teaching but not having the words to express it. I hoped that by engaging teachers in conversations and actively listening to them they could verbalize what they truly believed about reading instruction.

I was; however, constrained by my lack of experience and by my ability to interpret my findings. I also came to the study with many biases. The best way to deal with bias is to be aware of how bias may shape what we hear, how it interferes with our reproduction of the speaker's reality, and how it can transfigure "truth into falsity" (Merriam, 1998, p. 39). Because of my teaching experience and my extensive reading and university coursework, I have a certain perspective on reading instruction but I had never engaged in extensive conversations about reading instruction. While I wanted to find out what insights and frustrations other teachers had, I was cognisant of the fact that I might disagree with the viewpoints and practices of other teachers. Still I needed to keep myself open to new learning and new insights.

Selection of Participants

Qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding of phenomena. Therefore, researchers often work with small samples and look at the process or the meanings individuals attribute to their given social situation rather than generalizability across large populations (Hesse-Biber Nagy & Leavy, 2005). As a result, researchers choose a cohesive sample. A cohesive sample shares the characteristics that address the research topic. In order to achieve a cohesive sample I decided on the following criteria for selecting the participants: they must teach in the primary grades (K-3) and they should have five or more years of teaching experience. They should also have pursued additional education or training in reading, which may or may not include an M.Ed degree. I hoped to conduct my research in a specific rural school district in Alberta because the district had a history of being open to university educational research and this school district had taught its teachers *First Steps*, a balanced literacy program. I also wanted to conduct the research outside the school district in which I am employed.

After receiving permission from the University of Alberta, (Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board) to conduct the research, I sent out a letter to the superintendent of schools of a particular rural Alberta district school requesting permission to conduct the research study within the rural school district. The superintendent's office sent a letter granting me permission to conduct my research and to contact principals within the school district. I then sent a cover letter explaining my research proposal and a copy of the superintendent's letter to several schools within the district. School principals let their teachers know, via email, of my research project. Teachers were asked to contact me by e-mail if they were interested in participating in the research.

Three teachers voluntarily contacted me. They all met my criteria as they were experienced elementary school teachers with five or more years of teaching experience.

All three teachers indicated they had taken professional development offered by their district in the *First Steps* program.

Demographics of the Participants

The three participants in this study were employed as full-time teachers in the same rural school district. All three were elementary school teachers who had completed a bachelor of education program and had five or more years of teaching experience. One of the teachers taught a grade one class and the other two teachers taught combined classes—one a grade one/two combined class and the other a grade three/four combined class. Their teaching experience ranged from six years to approximately twenty years. All three teachers had participated in *First Steps* professional development provided within the school district and one teacher had participated in two weeks of additional professional development within the school district to become one of the instructional leaders or *First Steps* tutors in her school.

One of the teachers taught in a Logos program and the other two teachers taught in regular programs. Logos, a Christian Education Program, began in 1995 and follows the Alberta Program of Studies. However, the teaching of knowledge and skills is done within a Christian context. The teacher in the Logos program used Christian literature in her program but otherwise her reading program was similar to the other two teachers.

Research Timetable

Sept. 2004	Gained Ethics approval from the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board to conduct this study.
March, 2005	Gained permission from the Superintendent of Schools to conduct the study and contacted school principals in the district. The principals informed the teachers of the study via email and the teachers in turn contacted me.
April, 2005	Contacted three potential participants; met to discuss their potential involvement in the research and obtained consent.
July, 2005	Conducted the first interview in each of the participant's homes. The first interview lasted approximately one and a half hours each.
July, 2005	Sent transcripts of the interview to participants for verification of the information.
July, 2005	Conducted the focus group in one of the participant's homes. The focus group lasted approximately two hours.
July, 2005	Sent transcripts of the focus group to participants for verification of the information.
July, 2005	Conducted the second interview in each of the participant's homes. The second interview lasted approximately one and a half hours.
Aug. 2005	Sent transcripts of the second interview to participants for verification of the information.
Aug. 2005-Dec. 2006	Integrated data from the interviews and the focus group and began analyzing data and forming categories.
May-Aug. 2007	Conducted follow-up interviews in order to gather more information about the participants' background.
Aug. 2007	Sent transcripts of the third interview to participants for verification of the information.
Aug.-Nov. 2007	Integrated the new data from the interviews with the former data

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data consist of "direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" obtained through interviews, observations or documents (Patton, 1990, p. 10). Data for this study were collected through three sets of individual interviews with each participant and one focus group discussion using a list of interview questions. Because I believe in the importance of teachers' views, ideas and knowledge, I used the individual interviews and the focus group discussion to give teachers an opportunity to discuss their teaching strategies and to voice their successes and concerns. The interviews provided focused knowledge about what was happening in their classrooms. I also took field notes during the interviews and focus group discussion and recorded some of my thoughts and impressions immediately afterwards. These field notes consisted of thoughts generated from the discussion questions and questions that I might ask in a subsequent interview. They were also reflections on the ideas and concerns of the participants. I also obtained a copy of the program, *First Steps* that these teachers were using for reading instruction.

Like Shulman (1992), I was interested in teachers' thought processes of how and why they made the decisions they did. I was also interested in how they collaborated with other teachers, how they problem-solved to meet the needs of the children in their classrooms, and what were their reflective practices. Did they plan out their year or their day or did they take their teaching cues from the observations of children? What specific experiences and understandings influenced their instructional methods? As Shulman (1992) points out teachers' thoughts and judgments are central to understanding teaching.

Patton (1990) says that we interview people to find out things that we cannot directly observe—things like feelings, thoughts and intentions. By giving participants the opportunity to explore their beliefs and experiences related to a given topic, interviews allow us to enter into the participants' perspectives. Focus groups facilitate the exploration of mutual experiences and identities. Combining the two approaches allows "layers of meaning and explanation" to be explored (Michell, 1999, p. 41).

Two sets of interviews and the focus group discussion took place during the summer of 2005 while the third interview occurred in the summer of 2007 to augment the data. Although I had hoped to begin my interviews with the teachers during the spring of 2005 the participants requested that the meetings take place during the summer holidays because they felt they had more time to participate and to reflect on their teaching practices after the school year had ended. One of the teachers was pregnant with her first child and asked that the interviews and focus group be completed before the end of the July when her baby was due.

Individual Interviews

The purpose of an interview is to obtain exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory data (Hesse-Biber Nagy, & Leavy, 2005). According to Merriam (1998), interviews are the most common form of data collection in qualitative studies in education and the most common form of interview is the person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another. The purpose of the three interviews was to give participants the opportunity to explore their beliefs, thoughts, and experiences related to reading instruction. The semi-structured interview, a mix of more and less structured questions, allows individual respondents latitude and freedom to talk about what is of interest or importance to them. The conversation flows freely and can go in new and unexpected directions. Merriam (1998) says that less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways. Some of the questions were therefore open-ended and their exact order and the exact wording were not determined ahead of time. Because of our common experiences, the interviews and the focus group were more in the form of a conversation than a series of questions and answers.

The beginning of the research process, referred to as "entering the field", (Mertens, 1998) begins with building rapport with the participants. Building rapport is necessary because I as the researcher desire to create a human-to-human relationship with respondents so that I can understand their perspectives (Adler & Adler, 1994). This can include such things as establishing the things I have in common, displaying an interest in the participants, and acting like a person who belongs (being myself). Merriam (1998) recommends asking for relatively neutral, descriptive information at the beginning of the interview to lay the foundation for questions that access the interviewee's perceptions, opinions, and values. In this study a list of potential questions was submitted to each participant prior to the interview and used as a guide to access the experiences, thoughts, and understandings held by each participant. The exact wording or the order of the questions was not predetermined because this allowed me to respond to the situation at hand and to new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 1998). The questions were open-ended in order to gain spontaneous information about the attitudes and the actions of the participants (Nigel, 1993).

Examples of the interview questions for the first interview were as follows:

1. What reading program do you use in your classroom?

2. What instructional methods do you use in reading instruction? How would you describe effective reading instruction?
3. What would you consider to be essential elements of reading instruction?
4. How do you motivate the students in your classroom to read?
5. Do you see any connection between reading and writing competence and if so how does it influence your instruction?
6. What do you do to help those students who struggle to learn to read?

I felt an instant rapport with all three participants and the conversations came easily. As the interviewer I attempted to listen intently—"hearing what is not explicitly stated but only implied" (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). Denzin and Lincoln (1998) write that the interview is a conversation—the art of asking questions and listening. I tried to be a good listener knowing that these teachers were attempting to put into words thoughts and ideas that they might not have expressed previously. Yin (1994) says that being a good listener is to understand "the context from which the interviewee is perceiving the world" (p. 57). Understanding the teachers' background experiences was therefore also important.

These semi-structured interviews were conversations that were audio-taped. Although I provided a list of potential questions to each participant prior to the three interviews, the questions were used only as a starting point. I felt free to follow the direction of the conversation as teachers digressed. I began by saying, "Tell me about your classroom and your practices in reading instruction." The participants' responses to this prompt guided and influenced the questions that I asked. I followed the participants' lead encouraging them to discuss topics and ideas that were important to them. Participants described their individual practices and then reflected on them.

After each interview I transcribed the audio-tapes and sent a transcription of the audio-tape to each participant so that she might verify it and confirm that she was comfortable sharing the information. These member checks are used in most qualitative studies and are a key to establishing the accuracy and credibility of the research (Creswell, 1998. p. 203). They are important in establishing the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability. The teachers in this study did not change any of the information in the transcripts. I transcribed all the data and stored it on my personal computer and made back-up copies of all data on CDs and stored them in my home and at my office.

Focus Group Discussion

The focus group is "a happening in which a rich conversation occurs, but, while dynamic and unpredictable, this is never a naturally occurring conversation but always arranged for the purpose of research" (Hesse-Biber Nagy, & Leavy, 2005, p. 199). This group work creates a significant event and the dynamic produced within the group is termed the group effect (Carey, 1994). This group effect serves as an important and unique source of data. Morgan (1996) states, "What makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of individual interviews is the fact that the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other…such interactions offer valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity among participants" (p. 139).

The focus group offered the participants an opportunity to interact and exchange ideas. The researcher and participants generate a broad range of anecdotes and opinions that complement the more personal, detailed data in the individual interviews.

I prepared questions from categories that had emerged during the first individual interview to guide the focus group discussions. The focus group lasted approximately two hours and was held in a participant's home. Questions/prompts included:

1. Tell me about your challenges in teaching reading.
2. Tell me about your insights into reading instruction. What are the important things you teach?
3. What do you do with students who are struggling with literacy?
4. Tell me more about the reading-writing connection.
5. Tell me more about your writing program.
6. If you had the Minister of Education's ear, what would you say to him?

At the beginning of the focus group I shared a brief overview of the research process with the teachers and again reviewed my expectations of the study. I then asked the group if they had any insights or questions that they would like to share. Then the discussion began. I interjected to pose questions, ask for clarification, elaboration, or verification of comments made by the participants. As the focus group participants interacted, new issues and ideas surfaced. The teachers began to discuss many of the concerns and problems which they felt impeded their effectiveness in teaching reading

I audio-taped the focus group session, took notes, and later used the notes to augment the audio-tapes. At the end of the focus group I briefly summarized the conversation and then asked participants for any other thoughts or ideas they cared to share.

I believe that teachers need to discuss their teaching practices. As we enter into these discussions we open ourselves up to the thoughts and opinions of others as well as formulate our thoughts and opinions. The focus group gave the teachers an opportunity to dialogue with each other about the teaching of reading and their reasons and thought processes for doing the things they do. Morgan (1997) notes that, "The comparisons that participants make among each other's experiences and opinions are a valuable source of insights into complex behaviours and motivations" (p. 15). At the beginning of the session I summarized many of the issues raised and at the end of the focus group discussion I again summarized the major issues discussed, at which time the participants had the opportunity to clarify any of the points they had made. I transcribed the focus group discussion within the next two days and sent the transcript to the participants for a member check before the next interview.

Follow-up Interviews

A second interview gave the participants an opportunity to go away from the focus group, think about issues that had been raised, and then respond to them at the second individual interview. I encouraged participants to come to the second interview prepared with their additional comments, questions, and insights. At the close of the interview I again asked each participant to share any additional comments. The second interview was also conducted in the participants' homes and each lasted approximately one and a half hours. I developed the questions as I read through the transcript from the previous interview and the focus group. These questions/prompts included:

1. How do you adapt your classroom to accommodate for gender differences?
2. What resources do you want to see in your classroom?
3. Tell me about your professional development? Have there been courses that have helped you as a teacher?

4. What would you like to say to universities about your preservice teacher education?
5. Is there anything else you want to mention about reading instruction?

The third interview took place two years later. I felt it was valuable to return to the participants after a period of time to gain new perspectives and insights into their history and professional practice. The interviews lasted from between one and a half and two and a half hours. The questions/prompts included:

1. Tell me about your pre-school experiences with books.
2. Did your parents read to you when you were a young child?
3. Tell me about your early school experience.
4. Do you remember learning how to read?
5. What methods and materials did your teacher use in teaching you to read?
6. Tell me about your university experience?
7. What was your major and minor?
8. What courses did you find most valuable?
9. Tell me about your student teaching.
10. What did you learn from your mentor teachers?
11. What grade did you teach when you first began teaching?
12. What programs and materials did you use?
13. What programs and materials do you use now?
14. Tell me about your recent professional development.
15. Do you use the computer? What for?
16. Does your family use the computer? What for?

Transcriptions of each of these interviews were sent via email or hand delivered to each participant for member check and verification.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the act of making sense of the data. This may mean consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people say in light of what the researcher has read. This "meaning-making" involves moving back and forth between the data and abstract concepts. These meanings or understandings form the findings of the study (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). In addition, "collecting data always involves selecting data" (Dey, 1993, p. 15) and may mean that not everything is discussed in detail when the data is considered.

Merriam (1998) and Marshall and Rossman (1995) contend that data collection and data analysis must be a simultaneous process. Merriam (1998) states that the sense we make of the data we collect is equally influenced by the theoretical framework. That is, "our analysis and interpretation of our study findings will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place" (p. 48).

In this study, I attempted to understand and honor the participants' views and opinions about reading instruction. Certainly my background as a reading teacher and my knowledge of the history of reading research and instruction helped me to make sense of the data and formulate new questions for the focus group or the next interview.

As I reread my notes and approximately 200 pages of transcripts from the interviews and focus group discussion, I began to form categories. Category construction means attempting to capture some recurring patterns that cut across "the preponderance" of the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). I was aware that these categories should reflect the purpose of the research—or in other words, answer the research question (Merriam, 1998). The categories also needed to reflect the major thoughts and ideas of all of the teachers. I used my initial questions and the headings from Brian Cambourne's *Conditions for Learning* (see page 113) as a means of organizing the data. Devising these categories is systematic, informed by the study's purpose, the investigator's orientation and knowledge, and the meaning made explicitly by the participants themselves (Merriam, 1998). The bits of data are sorted into groups. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the "unit of data" must meet two criteria. It should be heuristic—the unit should reveal information relevant to the study and stimulate the reader to think beyond the particular bit of information. The unit should be "the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself—it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other than a broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out" (p. 345).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the basic issue of trustworthiness is, "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue" (p. 290)? Naturalistic criteria of trustworthiness are open-ended; "no amount of member checking, triangulation, persistent observation, auditing, or whatever can ever compel; it can at best persuade" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 329). Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that reliability in qualitative research has more meaning in human terms, that is, reliable research can be described in the same way as the behavior of a reliable person—"one who is consistent, dependable, and predictable" (p. 293). Dependability refers to the results of the study making sense or being consistent with the data collected. Techniques used to ensure dependability includes explaining the researcher's role (Merriam, 1998). My role was to collect data through the three interviews, a focus group and field notes taken during the interviews. I audio-taped the interviews and focus group, summarized the information, clustered the information into themes and developed research questions.

For a study to be trustworthy the accounts reported by the researcher should be accurate. The participants' viewpoints, thoughts, intentions and experiences should be accurately understood and reported and the theoretical explanation developed from the research study should fit the data (Johnson, 1997). To make sure I accurately reported the data I often used direct quotations from the participants, asked for feedback from them, and examined my personal biases.

Member Checks and Credibility

Credibility is the correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints (Mertens, 1998, p. 297). Silverman (2005) defines credibility as, "the extent to which any research claim has been shown to be based on evidence" (p. 377).

Member checks, considered by Mertens (1998) as the most important criteria in establishing credibility, give the participants the opportunity to provide feedback to the study. Member checks consist of taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). Member checks were conducted throughout this study to ensure that the research represented the perspectives of the participants. All three participants verified the contents of the interview transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

The term ethics is derived from the word ethos which means character. Codes of conduct are set in place to protect the research subjects and their setting, and the researcher must agree to adhere to these. Informed consent means that the participants understand what the study is about, how the results are to be used, that their participation is voluntary and can be stopped at any time without penalty, and that their identity is protected (Hesse-Biber Nagy, & Leavy, 2005).

Before the data is collected, the researcher must follow certain procedures to gain permission to conduct the research. In organizational settings such as universities and schools, formal procedures have been established that define how permission is obtained. I adhered to the *University of Alberta Standards For Protection Of Human Research Participants* during completion of my research at the University of Alberta. I also completed an ethics application and received approval from the Research Ethics Board of the Faculties of Education and Extension and worked closely with my supervisor to ensure that all ethical guidelines had been followed. Then, I contacted the superintendent of the school district by formal letter. After I had received written permission from the superintendent I contacted principals within the district. The principals contacted teachers via email asking if any of them were interested in participating in my research.

In the information letter and during the initial interview, I outlined the purpose of the study and the nature and extent of the participants' involvement and I informed participants of the following:

- Their participation was voluntary and they could choose to opt out at any time without penalty.
- They could decline to answer any questions they chose.
- They had the opportunity to engage in member checking of written transcripts and analysis.
- They were assured of anonymity.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality means no uniquely identifying information is attached to the data and thus, no one can track the data back to an individual. Assuring confidentiality signifies that I have protected the privacy of individuals by handling the data in such a way that it cannot be associated with them personally. It means that research subjects are protected by remaining unidentifiable. Their names may not be used in discussions or in any written material (Hesse-Biber Nagy, & Leavy, 2005).

I informed the participants in the research study that I would take all possible measures to ensure their confidentiality and I used pseudonyms to refer to the teachers in this study. In addition, all participants had the opportunity to engage in member checks during the data collection and analysis and had the opportunity to review the transcripts from the interviews and the focus group discussion.

Limitations and Delimitations

Delimitations and limitations establish the boundaries, exceptions, reservations, and qualifications inherent in every study (Castetter & Heisler, 1977). Delimitations are the ways in which the study is narrowed in scope. The limitations are the potential weaknesses of the study. Ellis (1998) writes,

> What one can see at any given time is limited by one's vantage point. Our horizons—our prejudices—continually change because of our contact with the horizons of others. Thus, the traditions that limit and influence us remain always in motion. To understand another, one does not surrender one's own standpoint and grasp that of another. Rather, as explained by Gadamer, a fusion of horizons takes the form of broadening one's own horizon through conversation—"the process of two people understanding each other" (p. 347). He says we each bring prejudices (or pre-judgments) to a meeting. In conversation we try to understand a horizon that is not our own in relation to our own. We seek to discover other peoples' standpoint and horizon and thus advance understanding.

This study is delimited to three teachers working in primary classrooms and is limited to the extent that the participants are able to express their beliefs and knowledge about reading instruction. The teachers did not always have the terms to express what they were doing or the reasons for undertaking their actions. The study is also limited by my ability to conduct individual interviews, facilitate the focus group, and to interpret the shared information. It is further limited by the fact that the information about the teachers' classroom practices was a result of the participants' self reporting. I did not observe them in their classrooms and therefore cannot say what they actually did in their teaching.

All the information is filtered through one's world-view, one's values, and one's perspective (Merriam, 1998). Limitations also include the fact that the findings of my study could be subject to my decisions on what was important and what was not and to my interpretations of the data. My teaching biases are made explicit in chapter two of this dissertation. The small number of participants in the study is also a limiting factor. A larger group of teachers would have added data to the study and perhaps new categories and insights.

Summary

This chapter gives an overview of qualitative research and a social constructivist paradigm and the reasons I chose to use this methodology for my research. A social constructivist paradigm is particularly suited to my research question: What instructional elements do the three experienced teachers believe are necessary for the successful teaching of reading in the primary grades? It also fits with my view of the world—the presence of multiple, socially constructed realities. I discussed the research design, the selection of participants, and the demographics of the participants. The majority of the chapter was devoted to explaining methods of data collection—interviews and focus group that were conducted in an Alberta school district with three teachers in order to discuss their perspectives of teaching reading. Included in this explanation are the four lists of questions for each of the interviews and the focus group. Some space is devoted to the method of data analysis. Because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, I explained the researcher's role in the data collection and analysis. Included in the chapter are discussions about the measures to ensure the quality of the design, including member checks, and issues of trustworthiness and dependability.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

After collecting and analyzing the research data, I saw a need to present a detailed description of each teacher's background and what they reported their classrooms looked like. The three teachers participating in this study were Hanna (grade 1/2 teacher) who had six years of experience, Ruth (grade 3/4 teacher) who had 14 years of experience and Mary (grade one teacher) who had 20 years of experience – all pseudonyms to protect their identity. At the beginning of the study they were all located in one school but since then Mary has moved to a new school within the same school district and Hanna has taken a maternity leave from teaching. It is important to note that the data presented here is taken only from the interviews and the focus group I held with the participants. I did not collect observational data in their classrooms. In chapter six I present the findings in relation to my three research questions.

Hanna

Hanna grew up on a farm north of Edmonton with her mom, dad and older brother. She remembers her mom reading to her when she was young and she had several children's books including sets of Dr. Seuss and Judy Blume books. Her parents didn't take her to the public library in a nearby town because they would have had to pay a fee to join the library. After learning to read Hanna would take books home from the school library and often would sit down and read a book non-stop until she had finished it.

When she entered school in a rural school district Hanna immediately liked it. Her teachers, except for a "meanie" in grade three, were caring and fun and she wanted to be a teacher like them. Her grade one teacher used a phonics-based program, reading groups, and the basal series, *Mr. Mugs* (Ginn & Company). Hanna wonders if part of the appeal of the basal series was the opportunity to revisit the likeable characters. She compares it to a television series that people like to watch because they like the characters. She also likes the fact that the stories in the basal series gradually became more difficult with larger vocabularies. She remembers the teachers using phonics workbooks and flash cards for basic high frequency words. Some of her favorite memories are of teachers reading out loud to the class and taking out story books from the school library. Because she can't remember any writing instruction during her school years she felt ill prepared to teach writing when she began teaching and she has made it a priority to learn more. She has incorporated many of the ideas of the writing portion of *First Steps* program into her teaching and finds it one of the most useful parts of the program.

Hanna's brother experienced difficulty in school and this motivated Hanna to select special needs as her minor at university and look for ways of reaching special needs children. Hanna feels that school is not fit for boys. She is especially aware of the needs of boys for different kinds of books—books on volcanoes, cars, and sports heroes. She works closely with struggling students and is sensitive to the needs of these students and their parents. She says:

> My brother had a very hard time in school and I don't think anyone realizes how that affects the family. I did quite well in school and I always had good teachers

and my brother did not do well in school. And from that I have more empathy for parents and children that I try to do a little more for them.

After finishing high school Hanna entered a four year B.Ed program (Elementary Route) at the University of Alberta in the late 1980s. She enrolled as a generalist with a minor in special needs. Although she had no desire to teach a special needs class she knew that special needs children were often integrated into regular classrooms and she wanted to be prepared to meet their needs. Hanna can only remember taking one course in reading but acknowledged the existence of some reading suggestions in a couple of the special needs classes that she has used in her teaching. When asked what her best class was, Hanna laughed when she says it was a music appreciation class. She is matter of fact when she states her university education was “not good”. She says, “I found the university experience lacking and I find that when you talk to lots of people coming out of university…there’s not enough content on what to do and how to do it. And we learned very little about the fundamentals of reading and teaching children how to read.”

Because she did not find her university courses particularly helpful she feels that she was thrown into teaching and that she “felt lost”. Hanna believes that the university courses were not as “hands-on” or practical as they could be. She thinks that it would have been better to have more courses in the core subjects of reading, writing, and math and more experience with children in the schools. She stated she would leave out some of the less necessary courses such as music and art appreciation. Eventually, Hanna would like to return to university to take additional courses in reading.

On the other hand Hanna valued her student teaching experience. Hanna feels that she was lucky and had two excellent mentor teachers during her student teaching practicum, one in grade one and another in grade three. Both teachers read a great deal to their students and this has influenced her to do the same. Describing them as good language arts teachers, focused on reading she says, "A lot of who I am is because of those two people. All of my basics that I started with came from them".

After finishing her bachelor of education degree Hanna substitute taught for four years and began gathering ideas from the schools where she worked. At the end of the four years she was offered a contract with a northern Alberta school district and for the next six years she taught in one school, teaching either grade one or grade one/two combined classes. Her first teaching assignment was teaching grade one. The other grade one class was taught by two teachers who shared the teaching load. These teachers were, according to Hanna, both excellent teachers and they informally mentored her. Focusing on reading and putting other things on the "back burner", both teachers came into school extra days to administer the diagnostic reading test or to read with individual students. Giving these two teachers much of the credit for her success as a teacher, Hanna believes that her focus on reading came from their excellent examples. Often during that first year she looked to them for extra help and advice and they freely shared their knowledge, insights, and resources with Hanna. Since then Hanna has often collaborated with other teachers and especially enjoyed the professional learning communities (PLCs) that her district instituted. She feels that any resources or professional development is secondary to the things she learns from discussions she has with other teachers. In fact, she often goes to other teachers for teaching ideas rather than search for them in professional teaching resources. Even though teacher resource books that accompany the basal readers are available she does not refer to them much, preferring to "do her own thing". She constantly adapts the lessons to the students she is teaching and finds each year is different because the children in each class are different. She says: “Everything I do in my classroom is something I’ve picked up here, there, and everywhere; put it together and made it my own”.

Early in her teaching career Hanna took two weeks of professional development (PD) in *First Steps*, the program instituted by her school district and as a result she became a *First Steps* tutor. The school district mandated *First Steps* throughout the district but without input or “buy-in” from the teachers. For six or seven PD days throughout the year she, along with another member of the staff, taught teachers *First Steps*. She received release time during the week to visit other teachers’ classrooms to model strategies, give them input and answer their questions. Hanna quickly realized that teachers did not want other teachers in their classrooms and many of the teachers especially the older, more experienced teachers did not want to change their reading programs. Resentment rather than buy-in existed in the district. In addition, the program seemed to be more accepted by teachers in division one than those in division two. Hanna attributes this to the fact that many of the concepts in *First Steps* are similar to strategies that teachers were already using. She says, “I found with *First Steps* that the reading and writing was really very much a combination of what most of us in our school did anyway”. She also notes that many parts of *First Steps* are more popular than others. For example, many teachers like the reading and writing programs but find the spelling program cumbersome and difficult to implement.

As a result of her additional *First Steps* training, Hanna is particularly knowledgeable about its resources and materials. She has instituted many of its components into her own teaching and continued to do so after *First Steps* was no longer mandated. She particularly values the reading and writing portions of *First Steps*.

For professional development Hanna gravitates towards reading and writing in-services. She especially values the workshops she takes through the local Reading Council and the Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium. Although Hanna values in-services she finds that some are good and some are not so good. She says, "They talk that they're supposed to be for your own benefit but they aren't". She feels that many of the things she learned in the in-services are hard to "put into play". She would rather go to different schools and watch other teachers as they work with their students.

Calling teachers "islands" she especially appreciates the Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The PLCs were instituted in her school district using Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) money from the provincial government. In the PLCs teachers from similar grade levels gather to discuss programs and their implementation. Sometimes she just goes and talks to other teachers in her schools and finds it helpful in her practice. She can't imagine teaching without other teachers to help her and declares that she needs them. She often takes something her coworkers have done and changes it and makes it her own. She also freely shares her ideas with others and considers it a complement when other teachers use her ideas. Although she finds some teachers are more receptive than others, she will often go to other teachers for advice on how to handle problems in her class.

Hanna often takes on student teachers and appreciates the experience because she finds that they make her reflect on what she is doing and why she is doing it. While she finds some student teachers are good, others don't have a strong work ethic and she finds it difficult to evaluate them. As the mentoring teacher, she tries to guide them, to model good teaching strategies, and to give them the freedom “to do their own thing”, understanding that student teaching is just one of the building blocks for their future teaching careers.

Hanna considers reading as important and necessary in life. Her reading instruction consists of reading to and with children and instruction in phonics, spelling, high frequency words, and comprehension. Teaching comprehension she admits is the most difficult area to teach. She finds that children are often in a rush to get through reading material and she has to slow them down and ask them questions to make sure they understand the text. Fluency, she finds, is not always an indication of comprehension. Sometimes children read fluently but do not understand what they read while other children read word by word and understand the text.

Hanna notes that most of the children coming into grade one know the alphabet letters and sounds because of their kindergarten experience. She continues to teach phonics, word families, and invented spelling that were first taught in kindergarten but adds high frequency words. She includes both read-aloud, shared reading, and independent reading during class time. Much of her reading program centers on the act of reading—reading to children and having children read during silent reading. She also likes children to read the stories they have composed to each other in pairs or small groups.

When Hanna began teaching grade one in the 1990s, whole language and the basal readers such as *Impressions* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston1984) were being phased out and balanced literacy was being phased into her particular school district. Unfortunately the school did not have all the resources such as the levelled readers to teach guided reading and Hanna continues to use the basal readers in reading groups. However, she does have levelled readers for home reading that have been provided by the school.

Hanna centers much of her teaching on children's literature. She often takes a series of books such as those of Robert Munsch, the Clifford Series (Bridwell), or the Magic Tree House series (Osborne) and uses them as springboards for teaching rhyming, reading and writing. This emphasis on literature came from the examples set by her mentor teachers during her student teaching days. She also finds teaching series of books from the same author motivates children to read and seek out other books by the same author. She conducts many author studies and has children compose stories based on the patterns of the storybooks.

Hanna sometimes finds reading instruction challenging because of the absence of good books for boys to read. She says,

> Especially for the struggling boys—it's really hard to find interesting reading for them. That's the real struggle. The girls will always read anything. There are a billion books on kitties and puppies and baking with mom, but there are so few books on motorcycles and car racing. My boys are mad about hockey but there are very few hockey books. I found a couple but they were very difficult, very hard to find. High interest, low vocabulary books for males.

Hanna relies on *Spelling through Phonics* (McCracken, 1985) for part of her spelling program because they have an emphasis on phonemic awareness and word families. Hanna admits that she did not learn about phonemic awareness during her university days but "picked it up along the way". Hanna also uses a word wall to teach high frequency words and spelling words—something that she gleaned from *First Steps*. She teaches about 80 high frequency words and gives challenge words to the students who are good spellers, once they have completed the 80 high frequency words. The spelling resource quickly becomes individualized because if students misspelled any words, those words become part of the next weeks' spelling list. She sends home a weekly list of the five spelling words with her students so that parents can help them practice. Hanna says, "The spelling [in the *First Steps* resource] was good. It was hard to get going but once you got it going it was very good." Using the "have-a-go-pads" in her spelling program "pushes the ones that are perfectionists who won't write anything down unless they know for sure that it is spelled right". She finds that using the have-a-go pads (small notepads that students use to practice writing a spelling word at least three times) is a way to boost children's self-esteem because they often are able to figure out how to spell a word on their own rather than have a teacher give them the spelling.

Using *First Steps* as her primary writing resource, she teaches brainstorming, guided writing, and modeled writing. The whole writing process takes about two or three blocks (class periods). She finds that if she breaks up the time too much students struggle to complete their writing assignments. Hanna says, "In grade one, if you break it up too much they'll lose it. It takes half an hour just to brainstorm. Some of them run with your ideas and adapt them and some of them get their own ideas and some basically write the story that you have brainstormed with them." Hanna does not think it is a problem that students write the same story that they wrote as a class (interactive writing). She says:

> It's fine. They think they wrote it. They did write it. At least it's better than them sitting there doing nothing. They think they came up with that idea in their head.

They don't really realize that we brainstormed it together. At least they put the sentences together. Maybe you didn't come up with the idea but maybe we can look at where we put capital letters and periods and maybe next time, because we feel better about writing—you write more from yourself. Otherwise they just sit there and do nothing. And then that might take two days and then the next day you edit it and blah blah blah, and then the next day you'll start again with reading. You'll pre-discuss the story in the reader and then you'll read it together and you'll read it in groups or buddy read it and then you do some kind of activity with it. So again two blocks later—they love to read their stories to each other.

Although Hanna often writes a story with her students using modeled writing or interactive writing, she sometimes reads a story and then has children write an interesting ending. But she finds that the children still need to brainstorm and have lots of conversations about ideas before they can write even an ending to a story.

Using journals as part of her writing program helps Hanna learn about her students both personally and academically. She uses them to show both her students and their parents the progress the student are making in writing and finds that parents are thrilled with the journals when they see them. The journals, an easy writing task because students write about things they know, comes in handy as a valuable fill-in for those days that do not follow the schedule. Hanna does not edit the students' journals but she uses them to teach different writing forms such as retelling, narratives, or report writing. She asks students to write in their journals every Monday and she responds by writing in each one. Hanna explains, "I don't edit their journals. Their journals are free writing. But we usually do it on Mondays and I respond to them. It's just questions--if we're working on retelling, or story writing, or reports." She finds that children who play videogames all weekend write about these games and little else. But other children write about activities they did during the weekend and this gives her an insight into their lives.

Hanna encourages students to proof read each others writing and finds this to be successful because students are generally supportive and kind to each other. She feels that better readers are better writers but only on certain writing assignments. Hanna says:

> If you have an assignment that is a retell, or tell me about your holidays, or something that they know or something that is concrete, they can write well—punctuation, sentence structure—all that is very good. But when it comes to dreaming up a fairy tale they're generally not as creative.

Hanna is quick to point out how difficult the process of writing is for students in the early grades. She says, "They also have to think about all those things like how do I hold my pencil and how do I spell this word and by the time they do all that they forget that good thought." Hanna finds that it is difficult for students to plan out their fiction or poetry writing and follow their plan and so she does not teach that component of writing in the *First Steps* resource book. Although students might write down a plan they simply do not follow it but begin to write a whole new story.

She confesses that it is more difficult to engage children in writing than in reading, especially those children who struggle to put their thoughts into writing. She says:

> You talk about engaging the non-interested reader. To me that's nothing compared to engaging the non-interested writer. You can always get the non-interested reader involved by reading to them or reading with you. There's always

> interesting books, puppets, baking. But if they have a writing block; to break that down; I had a little guy in grade two and he had a writing block. I talked to his mom, he must be in grade six now and she said he still struggles and you mention the word writing and he panics.

Hanna works hard at creating an atmosphere where students feel comfortable. Although she acknowledges that it sounds like a cliché, she likes to create a safe classroom where children can make mistakes and still feel okay about themselves. She states, "They spend more time with me than with their families in the evening." She goes on to say, "The key to motivating students is "feeling comfortable—feeling safe, feeling, and feeling like we are family." As Hanna develops a community of learners she finds that students help and motivate each other. Hanna says, "Eventually the others [the good readers] feed them [the struggling or reluctant readers]. So if you can get a few of them sold out, then the others will come along."

Calling herself quite strict, Hanna sets classroom rules at the beginning of the year but they are general such as "respect yourself, respect others." She feels once she has established those rules she can have fun with her students. She goes on to say, "It's your typical teacher thing…you line up; you don't just get up and leave my classroom. Then you can have a bit more fun with the kids because they know that if I say settle down or we are going to stop, we'll stop".

Hanna tried rewards for a short time and found it difficult to manage and finds verbal praise much more effective. If she gives out rewards it is always for everyone, rewarding children with more responsibility, with extra computer time, and with "silly things" like encouraging them sit on top of their desks to read or reading with a reading stick (a pink sparkly wand). She also likes to talk with the parents to find out what motivates their child.

Because she finds parent helpers are not always available or consistent, Hanna tends to work closely with the parents of her students especially those who have struggling readers. Estimating that only about 75% of her parents do the home reading with their children, she meets with parents and discusses ways of motivating and encouraging their children to read. She stresses the importance of parents reading to and with their child for just ten minutes a day and encourages parents to incorporate reading into life by cooking with children or even counting money.

Believing that schools have too much responsibility for educating children, Hanna would like to see the responsibility shift more to the home. She does not feel many parents read to their children before they come to school because few children come into her program with a love of reading. Children tend to see reading as "something they have to do" rather than something they enjoy doing. Disappointed that many parents in her program do not read enough to their children or follow the home reading program, she dismisses parents making excuses about not having enough time to read to their children or that their children refuse to read with them. She says:

> That's one thing I am fanatical about is you can read to your children and you can read with your children. They [the parents] don't understand what a difference it makes. I have an aunt and uncle. They are both professionals and I don't think they ever read with their daughter and then she ended up having learning difficulties and I think they almost use it as an excuse now that they don't have to because there is a reason why she is not doing well instead of reading more with

her to overcome it and help her do better. You two are educated. You know better. Read with her every night five minutes, ten minutes.

Hanna admits she has been unable to teach some students to read but she keeps searching for answers. At times she is at a loss and unsure about what will work for every student. At the same time she feels the pressure to get through the curriculum and so does not always have time to slow down and give that extra support and instruction that some students need. All the while she continues to search for answers by talking with the students' parents or trying to discover students' interests.

Part of this searching takes the form of self-reflection. Hanna calls it the most valuable thing she does. She says, "It's always these epiphanies. You take from everything and twist it to suit you. Whatever you can do to make it better—that didn't quite work, why? It's with everything you do in teaching; I don't think you ever stop self-reflecting slash self-obsessing."

Unfortunately sometimes nothing seems to work and Hanna is at a loss. She has retained students for a second year, but only if they were immature, and she distinguishes these from students who lack ability whom she never holds back. Hanna says, "There are those students who don't have that ability and it doesn't help to hold those students back." In her entire teaching career she has retained only two students and both times she had the students the next year and found that they did much better in school. She feels that all students would do better if they began school at an older age. In her school district children can begin grade one at five and a half years of age. She would like to see students begin school at six years of age.

Understanding the importance of good speech and articulation in the acquisition of reading skills, Hanna decries the lack of speech pathologists in her school district. She says, “The little we have, they’re finding new jobs every six months or they only come on Fridays and Fridays is the day we have fun day or Christmas concert or it’s canceled for some reason.” She goes on to say:

> I had one little guy who had a problem with his eyes; his eyes would jump when he was reading a line and he couldn’t focus on print. His mom took him to a specialist. I did keep him back because once we learned of this problem he still had to [learn to] read. But he had bad speech and his spelling is horrendous because he can’t say the words properly and you don’t know what he is saying. He is repeating grade one and now it’s not age appropriate and they are helping him but I think it’s almost too late because he has developed bad habits. And so often it gets left.

Although she tries to follow the curriculum she finds it impossible with a combined grade one/two class and tends to leave out subjects such as health and science simply because she does not have the time to spend on them. If she could change the curriculum she would center instruction in the early grades around math and reading because she believes they are “building blocks” for the rest of the school experience. She would also like to see science and social studies as themes that are built into the reading and writing and in fact she feels that integration of subject areas is the key to a successful primary program. She believes that children need to read, read, read and to be read to by the teacher. Feeling frustrated with the number of subjects she needs to teach and the large number of interruptions throughout the day, she feels the curriculum is simply too large. In fact she finds the most frustrating thing about teaching is the lack of time to cover the important areas of curriculum. She says:

> But it's like everything, I just find you just need more time in your day. By the time you do some spelling, some phonemic awareness, some phonics, and some reading and it's like, I've hardly written this week I want to write more. You need some time in your day like sharing the story that you wrote or reading to a buddy. One resource we need is more time. We are rushed and pushing too much on the kids. And we are moving on without doing a proper job of it because there's too much math, too many science units. It's all the way through and you know high school teachers say you don't know our curriculum. No, you don't understand our curriculum is heavy too and we have little, little kids. There needs to be time for those frivolous things that aren't frivolous.

Hanna thinks that teachers need to do less of everything and better at everything. Many activities interfere with the important job of teaching young children to read and she sometimes resents all the extras in the day that eat up time. This includes time devoted to computer instruction. Hanna wonders about the value of computers for the early grades. Children need keyboard skills before they can really use the computer successfully and if she doesn't teach them children tend to develop bad habits that are difficult to break. Although she understands that the mandate is to integrate computer use with other subjects that is difficult to do with young children who do not yet know how to read and write. Hanna tends to use computers in spurts rather than regularly and would rather use the time for reading, writing, and math instruction. Hanna wonders about technology and the ways it impacts students in her class and their ability to concentrate and learn. She says:

> You know what I think there is so much. I hate to sound like a miserable person but with video games and the constant television—there's so much, there are cartoon channels with all kids' shows, and video games. Kids don't read to themselves, kids don't pile up all the cushions and build a fort. They don't know how to entertain themselves because they are so used to being entertained. They are so used to being spoon fed for everything that they have a very hard time thinking for themselves. What about their imagination and I wonder how the games mentality—things changing so fast—what does it do to their concentration?

Having said that, Hanna uses reading programs on the computer and finds some to be good. The grade two students in her class use computers to research topics on the Internet. She finds that children are sometimes more motivated on the computer than if they had done the projects without it.

Hanna uses technology in her own life and admits she would have a difficult time teaching without the use of a computer. She uses email every day, types out lesson plans and report cards, and searches for information on the Internet. For example, when she taught a unit on China she went on the Internet to find out information that would help her plan her lessons. Although she feels confident on the computer she relies on her husband to install programs and admits that he is much more computer savvy that she is.

Aware of several roadblocks to doing her job, Hanna laments the lack of books and other resources in her classroom, the interruptions in the school day, and the unrealistic curriculum demands. Finding that sometimes administrators can get in the way of doing her job, Hanna wants administrators to guide rather than manage her. She desires the freedom to make decisions. She goes on to say, "Number one thing that an administrator needs to do is make you feel trusted and valued. If they devalue you or make you feel like you don't know what you are doing then you lose your staff. I think they have to treat us as the professionals that we are."

At the time of the initial interview, Hanna, and her husband, a teacher in the same school district, were expecting their first child. Two years later, at the time of the third interview Hanna's daughter, Faye was a toddler who was talking in sentences. Hanna especially loves reading and collecting children's books and leaves stacks of children's books in every room of her house. When Faye was just a week old Hanna began reading simple board books to her and now she reads to her as much as an hour a day. At two years old Faye has already memorized a couple of books, can fill in the rhyming words for several more and can recognize some of the letters of the alphabet. Hanna has noticed that Faye's vocabulary has expanded as a result of these reading experiences.

As a young, busy mother Hanna struggles to find time to read for pleasure. She tends to read "mindless" things like magazine articles but when she gets a chance she returns to her first love, the English classics, such as Jane Austin's books.

In all, Hanna enjoys and values her teaching career, and would not like to do anything else. For now she has decided to remain at home with her young child but looks forward to returning to teaching in the future.

Ruth

Ruth, an experienced teacher of 14 years, was teaching a grade three/four combined class when I first interviewed her and she was teaching a grade two class during the third interview. She grew up a small community in the Northwest Territories, the oldest of six children. Ruth does not remember her parents reading to her as a young child and cannot remember any children's books in her home. She remembers her dad reading but not her mom. Wanting to learn to read from a young age because of her dad's example, she entered grade one and she learned to read quickly and effortlessly from the Dick and Jane basal readers. She has fond memories of those readers and especially enjoyed the pictures of "the little girls in short dresses" and the simple stories about family life. Ruth also remembers spelling and handwriting instruction. She was particularly good at spelling and consistently won the spelling bees. This surprises her since according to her she did not come to school with a large vocabulary.

In kindergarten, Ruth loved the structure, the routine, the singing, and the games. This love of school and love of learning stayed with her in spite of teachers who were sometimes not so nice. Ruth's grade one teacher, a nun in the local Catholic school, was strict and even overbearing but that did not stop Ruth from loving school. From a young age Ruth believes that she had a calling to become a teacher. It was the only thing she ever wanted to be. She says:

> Right from grade one. I used to steal chalk from school and take my brother and sit him down and write on my mom's walls with the stolen chalk. I would teach him everything that I learned that day. So I did steal a little bit. I believe it [teaching] was a calling on my life. That's all I have ever wanted to be. I couldn't

> see myself being anything but a teacher. It had nothing to do with money, status, position. Nothing that I had to do in life, it was the only thing that would make me happy.

Because Ruth grew up in a small community without a television she was drawn to reading. From the time she was in grade three or four she became a regular visitor of the local library. Mrs. White, an older woman and the owner of a local hardware store, had a vision for the small community and started the library in a small log cabin. Ruth loved to read series books such as Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and the Bobsey Twins and would take out several books at a time. Series books provided familiar characters, a well developed fantasy world and a continuous story that were all attractive and inviting to Ruth. She would lose herself in their fantasy world, spending hours reading. Reading became her passion and her escape and she regularly retreated to her bedroom where she "became teen detective, Nancy Drew".

The dream of becoming a teacher stayed with Ruth through her rebellious years in junior high and throughout high school. Knowing that she needed good marks for university entrance, she studied hard. It was only natural for Ruth that when she graduated from high school she enrolled in the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education. But university with its extensive campus and large class sizes was frightening and daunting. City life with its neon signs and unfamiliar bus routes were intimidating and confusing. Ruth tells the story of riding a bus for its full circuit because she missed her stop and she was afraid that she would get lost if she got off any other stop.

But university was not to be—at least for the moment. In October during her first year Ruth was called home to look after her siblings. Her parents had been in a serious car accident, her mother was critically injured, and her parents asked Ruth to come back home and look after her younger siblings. After several months in the hospital, Ruth's mother was released and Ruth was able to return to school the following September. This time Ruth chose to go to Red Deer College because the campus had small class sizes, and as a result, was more personable and gave her the opportunity to get to know her professors. She could also stay in the dorms on campus and didn't have to figure out bus schedules. She chose language arts and physical education as her minors. She took as many language arts courses as she could fit into her schedule including linguistics—something she found difficult. As a result Ruth felt quite confident teaching both reading and physical education classes when she began her first teaching assignment. On the other hand, she did not feel so confident teaching writing. She cannot remember being taught how to write in elementary, junior high, or high school and so when she had to write her first term paper at university, she had to teach herself how to do it by reading books about essay writing. For this reason she especially appreciates the writing portion of *First Steps* and uses these ideas extensively in her writing instruction.

Ruth's favorite subjects at university were actually psychology and sociology. In those courses she learned about people, and one course in particular influenced her teaching career. In a sociology course she had the assignment of observing children on a playground and then writing a paper on it. This had a profound effect on her because from that point on she began to observe children. This "kid watching" has continued throughout her teaching career and is a cornerstone in her teaching. Calling herself more of a facilitator than a teacher she does not talk much in her class but considers herself more of a helper. As she observes her students she is looking for ways that will work for them. Her "kid watching" helps her teach because she feels that she really knows her students and this has helped her to write report cards and to teach them more effectively because she knows what they can and cannot do. She tends to individualize for students calling it a natural process. She says: "I do feel that I know these children really well—their personalities and their likes and dislikes and their families and their hopes and dreams. I think I know them really well."

After two years at Red Deer College Ruth took a year off to travel in Europe before she returned to the University of Alberta to complete her final two years of her education degree. She found that some of the university courses were not practical enough, and she gives the example of writing out two page lesson plans at university that were simply not do-able when she began teaching. In her teaching career she does more thinking and reflecting on her day than writing down detailed lessons plans for the next day. She feels that university students need to do more teaching and less writing out detailed lesson plans and they would benefit from more experiences with children. Commenting on her university experience Ruth says:

> I don't think I got enough of the practical side of teaching. I got a lot of theory and I know we were supposed to get the practical in student teaching—it depended on your cooperating teacher. I had some good cooperating teachers but university didn't prepare me for practical teaching in the classroom. I had to learn it. I still find that teachers still have to learn it. Our beginning teachers still have to learn it, they still make the comment that nobody told me that it was going to be like this in the classroom.

Ruth's student teaching was not always a pleasant experience for her and left her with mixed feelings. Her first placement was in grade six with two very different male teachers. The first was personable and helpful but the second one was in Ruth's words, "militant" with the students in his class and she was quite intimidated by him. He often left the class when Ruth was teaching and as a result he did not give her much professional input. She felt he just wanted someone to do the teaching for him. As much as she disliked the placement she came away with a life lesson that profoundly affected her teaching. She learned how difficult it is to learn if one is frightened and anxious and she realized that children must have the same problem learning if they are afraid of the teacher. At that point she made up her mind that children would never be afraid of her.

Ruth's second placement was in two very different primary classrooms. Ruth had a good experience with a young grade two teacher who was encouraging and supportive. This teacher recognized the potential in Ruth, giving her constructive criticism and sincere encouragement. Years later Ruth is still grateful for her time with that teacher and this experience has encouraged her to mentor young teachers.

Ruth also spent time during her practicum with a grade one teacher who was a spinster who had committed her life to teaching. This teacher was a "Mary Poppins" who was a performer, a singer and a talented teacher. Ruth learned some important lessons from this teacher. She particularly admired the sensitivity this teacher showed to the students in her class. She was never afraid to stop and change what she was doing in order to address the needs of her class. This taught Ruth to be more flexible and to pay attention to her students. But this was not a particularly positive experience for Ruth because she felt extremely intimated by this teacher. In Ruth's words the teacher was "perfect" and as a result Ruth felt inadequate. Even though this was not a particularly good experience for her, Ruth admits that it might have been a good experience for other pre-service teachers.

When Ruth finished her university education she worked for five years in two different private Christian schools. In these schools she taught grade one and grade two, teaching reading using a phonics-based program. Ruth then stayed home the next twelve years to raise her three children.

During those years when her children were young, Ruth spent many hours reading to them. Since her husband also has a passion for reading the whole family would gather together on a Sunday evening and read. Ruth's husband enjoys collecting books so much that Ruth has asked him to stop bringing them home because the bookshelves are overflowing. Her two boys still read a great deal. Her oldest son, David, 19 years old, enjoys reading Bathroom Readers (books of interesting facts) and comics such as *Dilbert* and *Calvin and Hobbs,* while her younger son, Robbie, 17 years old, is an avid reader with the same taste in books as his dad. He will often read the same books (history, mystery, and war books) as his dad and they will have lively discussions about their readings. Debbie, 14 years old and Ruth's only daughter, is not as much a reader as her siblings and tends to read magazines such as *Brio Magazine*. Ruth regularly reads books although during the school year she struggles to find the time. Reading tends to be the highlight of her summer and she usually reads several books, usually Christian historical fiction and Christian self-help books. When she returns to school each fall she shares her reading experiences with her students as a way of motivating them to read.

Since returning to teaching Ruth has worked for seven years with her current board in the Logos (Christian Education) program. Ruth feels lucky to have had mentors when she came back to teaching after several years of being home with her family. She says:

> I was fortunate when I came back teaching to have teachers who were really open to first of all the program we were pioneering, which was Logos. Even if there was any controversy before I got there, I didn't feel it when I got there. I naturally gravitated to the [same] grade level teachers and one in particular opened up her cupboards and she had thousands of dollars worth of books and resources and she gave me permission to go into her room and take whatever I needed. That was a relief. I had another teacher who was teaching a combined grade three/four class and any opportunity that she had to drop by my room and either offer books or ideas or support and I was very fortunate they were there if I needed help. And I felt they [all teachers] were all approachable.

Ruth is strongly committed to the spiritual welfare of her students and their academic growth. She comments, "I have the freedom to pray with my kids. I have a prayer box in the room and kids can write down requests and nothing is too big or too little to pray about. They have access to that kind of confidentiality. We don't share anything outside the classroom and they know that they can approach each other and me."

She takes an intense interest in her students and especially the children that experience difficulty learning to read. She says, "I've had plenty of kids like that. I can't say that I've had complete success. Those are the kind of kids that keep you up at night or you wonder about. You wonder if you have made a difference. That is what teaching is. You give of yourself and sometimes it's not enough."

To meet the needs of her special needs students, Ruth tries to learn as much as possible about them by reviewing their cumulative files and observing them. As a result she is able to describe her student's needs in great detail. Her student observations have led her to differentiate instruction for all her students and she is insistent that good teachers have been doing it "since the beginning of time" although it seems to be the "new thing" in education.

Calling teaching a ten month marathon, Ruth feels that teaching is often moving from crisis to crisis. Often she goes home after school but finds herself constantly thinking about her class and what she can do better and what specific things she can do for her individual students. The time factor and the resulting inability to cover everything she needs to or resolve all the problems is the most challenging part of teaching for Ruth. As a result Ruth begrudges the extracurricular activities, the committees, and being involved in whole school decisions. She says, "Sometimes I have to catch myself and remind myself why I am there. I signed a contract to teach children and not to be making school decisions".

To cover as much material as possible Ruth will often integrate other subject areas into language arts. She often reads math, science, or social studies books out-loud to her students and then has discussions about what they have read. She gives the example of reading a book on lobstering to her class that supported their study of a harbor city in the social studies curriculum. By reading the book the children gained a unique and insightful understanding of life in the Maritimes that they would not have had by simply reading the information books.

Ruth has strong parental support and several parents come and volunteer in the school as "reading pals" and read with children in her class on a regular basis. She has also gained the admiration and respect of the parents in her program and was recently nominated for a provincial excellence in teaching award by one of the parents.

Recently, Ruth moved from teaching a combined grade three/four classroom to teaching in a grade two classroom. She is happy with the move and has enjoyed the fact that she has only one grade level to teach and that she is not doing the highly stressful job of getting grade three students ready for the Provincial Achievement Exams.

Ruth describes the curriculum as "a mile wide and an inch deep". Feeling obliged to cover the entire curriculum and especially the critical outcomes whether she is teaching a single grade or a combined class, Ruth often resents the interruptions of additional assemblies and activities. Although she laments the cumbersome nature of the curriculum she feels an obligation to the next teacher to cover as much of it as possible. She never neglects math and tries to integrate language arts into all curriculum areas as a means of covering all the outcomes.

The lack of resources makes teaching difficult. Although she was in-serviced in *First Steps* and in guided reading, she does not have the leveled readers to institute guided reading in her classroom on a regular basis. If she does have several copies of books, such as *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952), she will use them for guided reading. As a result, she is still using the old basal readers such as *Cornerstones* (Gage, 1999) and *Impressions* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984) in reading groups and gets kids to read leveled texts during computer instruction. To her it seems silly to train teachers in a program and then not give them the resources to implement it. Consequently, she feels resentful about the decision to buy all new computers in the computer lab even though they are five years old. Ruth says:

> I don't think there is an understanding of how much elementary teachers spend of their own money and I really think that there is a sense that these resources just happen but they do come out of our pockets, and the classroom budget that I have--$100.00, that's gone before school even starts and so I think we need more classroom budgets. If I am going to buy books for my room I have to pay for that. We are spending [money] on computers. And we really don't need new computers.

Ruth goes on to say, "I don't have enough books and I don't have the freedom to go out and buy the books I need. I need more material in my room and anything I need for my room I need to buy it. I do question some of the ways we spend our money". As a result Ruth buys many books for her classroom and then identifies the reading levels by herself.

Ruth's school invested in a set of lap top computers two years ago. But because they take about twenty minutes or about half the class time to set up, most of the teachers prefer to use the computer lab. As a result the lap top computers sit in their cart, unused. Ruth takes her students to the computer lab twice a week and usually does research for various projects and papers with her students. She teaches key boarding skills, and has her students visit literacy sites or use literacy programs. Ruth finds getting students to do any writing on the computer is difficult because they don't have the keyboarding skills.

She also uses a reading program called *Academy of Reading* (AutoSkill International Incorporated) and admits this is an excellent program. It has literacy games and leveled stories and comprehension questions that go with the stories. Along with this program the school has other programs that Ruth uses. Many of them contain word games such as word searches and word ladders. For developing keyboarding skills which Ruth finds essential, she uses a program called *Type to Learn* published by Sunburst Communications. She also has access to a Pearson computer reading program that accompanies the new Social Studies curriculum but unfortunately the books on the program are at too high a reading level for her students and she is unable to use it.

Because many of the children in her class are from a small town or near-by farms, they do not all have computers in their homes. Other parents do not allow their young children to use the computers and as a result many of her students use library books to research information for assigned projects. But Ruth does have some students who spend a great deal of their spare time playing computer games and this concerns her. She has "students who can't think creatively or think outside the box". When she asks them to write a creative story they tend to do a retell of a violent video game. She related the story of one student who spends all his spare time on the computer. He plays computer games until 11:00 p.m. every night and then can't sleep at night because his mind is so stimulated. During the day he is lethargic and often lays his head down on his desk and cannot focus during class time. She admits that she finds it difficult to compete with a computer saying she is not as "stimulating, colorful, or fast-moving" as a computer.

As a proponent of physical education she decries the fact that many of her students are on the computer instead of playing outside and getting physical exercise. She says, "Bodies are made to run around, tear around. Little boys should be running around, playing soccer, eating healthy, flopping into bed, and having a sound sleep".

Although Ruth admits that she is not computer savvy she uses computers every day especially for email. She is also "forced" to use computers to write her report cards but has experienced the frustration of computer technology when the server goes down as she is in the midst of writing report cards. She maintains that computers are "not the end all and be all". Her husband is more computer savvy than she is and uses them extensively in his job at one of the major banks, but he does not trust them. As a result, Ruth is particularly aware of bank fraud and identity theft over the computer. Her children, all teenagers, use computers to communicate with their friends on MSN and Nexopia, google information, and play computer games. She frets that children give out too much information on MSN and relays the experience of her daughter as proof. Her daughter recently received a telephone call from a stranger that knew all about her. Ruth wonders if the stranger found out about her daughter through MSN. As a result Ruth's daughter is no longer using MSN to communicate with her friends.

Ruth appreciates professional development especially after being away from teaching for a few years. She says:

> I couldn't get enough…anything, whether it was in reading, writing, or computers, I went to. I loved Teachers Conventions because I got to seek out the latest or the areas that I felt I needed to grow in. And every year I have taken courses that strengthen who I am in the classroom. Professional development is really important to me. I need it.

Ruth values the in-school professional development more than the district PD which she finds prescribed. Ruth says, "I think our school does a good job of PD days. We seem to have more control as a school and I wouldn't like to lose that. I think it is definitely meeting our needs".

Although Ruth continues to use many of the things from *First Steps* she says she uses a mixture of things to teach reading, spelling, and writing. She feels that her district has "lost sight of *First Steps*" and even though there was a real push for everyone to get on board, teachers kept doing what they knew. She continues to take professional development courses and incorporate many of the things she learns into her program. Recently she was at an in-service with a consultant who taught a writing course within the district. The consultant advocates writing down key words and then adding interesting adjectives and adverbs to the key words to create a sentence. This program is offered in conjunction with the *Blended Sight Sound Method* (1969) created by Anna Ingham. Ruth took a course from Ingham several years ago and especially likes the "Sound City" which is a display of many of the phonics rules. Ruth plans to use this new writing program because she thinks it will work for her and because she was impressed by some of the writing samples at the in-service. She also took an in-service in Calgary recently on literacy backpacks and plans to incorporate these into her home reading program. One of the most beneficial in-services she took was one with Miriam Trehearne and Ruth often refers to Trehearne's books, *Comprehensive Literacy Resource for Grade 1-2 Teachers (2005)* and *Comprehensive Literacy Resource for Grade 3-6 Teachers (2006)*. She has a large collection of teacher resource books that she picks up at Teachers' Conventions, from the Scholastic Book Club, or from the school library and refers to them as she plans her units.

First Steps resource books continue to play a big part in her planning and teaching. She uses the parent ideas section of the resource book and often copies portions of it to hand out to parents. She especially values the four continua for reading, writing, oral language and spelling because they helps her assess students and understand their progress. The continuum shows her where the kids should be at different times of the year.

Ruth does not write out all her lesson plans, simply because she doesn't have the time. Feeling she has a strong handle on the curriculum and the outcomes, she prepares the different subject units ahead of time. She reflects constantly about her day and what she is going to teach.

During the language arts period of the day Ruth often does shared reading and reading out loud with her students, making sure she reads with expression. She remembers tuning out when her teachers read in a "droning" voice during her elementary years. Although she realizes the importance of reading out loud, she sometimes finds it difficult to fit reading narrative books into the day. She often reads devotional, science, and social studies books out loud as a way of integrating these subjects into the language arts curriculum. She gives students time each day for independent reading, regularly does novel studies in reading groups, and uses Literature Circles to motivate students to read. Ruth explains:

> I've tried Lit Circles with them [students]. They like them and I have to do more research on it to do it better. They each have their own role and it's not as big a

> job as answering ten comprehension questions. Especially the kids that are artistic—they get to draw illustrations. Then there are kids that are discussion directors and they like to make up questions. They're working together and they're more relaxed but they stay on task because it's not such a huge job for them and they understand the task and they work together.

Ruth defines reading as comprehension of text. She regularly listens to her students read and often finds that students who make miscues such as omitting words and mispronouncing words in their reading have difficulty understanding text. As these students are reading, Ruth tries to slow them down and get them to think about what they are reading. She says:

> I have two blocks a week that I devote to comprehension. I take the time because I think that it is that important. I will find different comprehension activities, hopefully they are fun. Short articles…whether it is critical thinking, inferencing, problem solving or thinking outside the box, I try to deal with it that way. I like to mix it up. So we do it together and the highlighter is an important tool. I'll get them to read it first and then we'll go back as a class and highlight what is important. We need to understand that there are certain words that will guide us in understanding. So then we go back and highlight together and discuss all along the way…And if you don't understand, there are strategies involved to help you understand. Why do we have picture books? The pictures are there to put everything in context. So sometimes you encounter words you don't know and the pictures will help you.

Spelling is an important part of Ruth's program. She teaches word families to the children so that they will learn to read and write hundreds of words. She also covers high frequency words and adds bonus words from different subject areas. She teaches these words using a variety of games including puzzles, word searches, and word pyramids that come from *First Steps*. In addition she talks with her students about synonyms, homonyms, compound words, and 'plays' with these words and their meanings. In doing these kinds of activities she is actually teaching vocabulary as well as spelling.

She also teaches the word wall words through a 'no excuses' page that she hands out to all her students. An idea that she gleaned from Miriam Trehearne, the 'no excuses' page is a list of 50 high frequency words that students are not allowed to misspell in their writing or they have to write them out twenty times. This strategy forces students to proof read their writing and learn these words.

Another component of *First Steps* is the "have-a-go pads" Ruth particularly appreciates the have-a-go pads and claims that they are a big part of her spelling resource. The students use them during writing assignments and Ruth finds that they helped them to be more fluent and creative in their writing because students do not focus on the spelling but on the writing. She also finds that students can become more independent. The "have-a-go pads also allow students to ask for help quietly and therefore, privately. In the end, the students have a mini dictionary that they can refer to in their future writing.

Realizing that reading and writing are closely linked, Ruth tends to make writing a priority. She finds that good readers are good writers. She says, "I think for my grade level, if they are good readers, they have a larger vocabulary, they have more to draw from, and they have more resources. If they are reading for enjoyment, they apply their reading skills to their writing."

Ruth incorporates journal writing into all subject areas but rather than have students choose their own topics, she gives them writing assignments to help them think and write critically. For example, Ruth gives her students a scripture related to the character trait they are studying for that week which they analyze in their journals. She finds that if her students are left to themselves they write the same thing over and over again and their writing becomes stunted.

In addition to using the writing suggestions offered by *First Steps*, Ruth often uses books as patterns for writing. She says, "Good authors have good patterning for kids. You can take Judith Viorst; she sets a pattern…it's like a rhythm and kids can get into it and they can write like she wrote." Recently she used the book, *Boss for a Week* (Handy, 1984) as a pattern and the students in her class created and illustrated individual books. She notes that her students love humor and so to motivate them to write she will use books like *Frog and Toad are Friends* (Lobel, 1970) as patterns.

Ruth feels that students don't need to use a planning page for fiction and poetry writing and that real fiction writers do not plan out what they are going to write, they just begin to write. Ruth explains:

> Something I always wonder about is that we always require kids to brainstorm or web or have an organizational way of planning. I don't know many adult authors who do that. We require kids to do that when they write but I don't know if Stephen King does it or if he just starts putting down thoughts and writes, writes, writes. Sometimes we put so much pressure on kids to do things just right. I think

> they need some of those tools and skills but sometimes I think they just need to write, just for fun or enjoyment. I think it's a higher skill to plan before you write. Try to figure out the end before you write.

Instead of using a planning page, Ruth brainstorms or discusses the 5W's of writing—who, what, where, when and why to help children get started in writing. Ruth also uses a rubric to teach writing and has students mark their writing according to the rubric. She says:

> I find a rubric comes in really handy—just working backwards. I get them to take their rubric before they start writing and have them look at all the different areas that we want to cover. There's organization and sentence structure and mechanics and we go through it each time before they write. What we are looking for—descriptive language and then after they write they mark their own on the rubric and they hand it in to me. I found it way easier for marking but it also gives them something more specific to work from. They are able to say, "Oh I can get from a 1 to 5 [mark] in vocabulary. What am I looking for?"

Ruth does not get her students to proof read each others work because she finds it too time consuming. Instead she tends to teach many of the writing skills including proof reading by doing shared writing lessons with her students.

Every year she finds that parents are reading less and less with their children and speculates that these children are spending their time playing Nintendo and computer games. Parents and students often perceive reading as a chore rather than a pleasurable activity. She wonders if this is because parents work and do not have time to read for pleasure and this attitude about reading ultimately influences their children.

The most important thing Ruth does during the school year is to establish a sense of community. She tries to set the tone for her class at the beginning of the year by reaching out to each child and making a personal connection. Part of this process is the discussion of the classroom rules, the creation of a classroom quilt, and time set aside to play games. She says:

> I think the main purpose or goal I try to accomplish in the first week of school is to give the students a sense of community that we all belong together. I really want them to feel that we are one classroom and I try to set that tone. We do work together on rules for our classroom, rules that they think are important. I give them some reflection time where they can decide on some goals. We often do "getting to know each other" games and make a classroom quilt together or do something that is a classroom based project. I really feel that kids want to know that their teacher is excited about her job and excited about having them in her class. I try to make it a point to get to each individual student whether it be at recess or something said in passing—something that is a personal remark that touches a heartstring."

If Ruth does not set the tone for her class at the beginning of the year, her classroom management suffers. When she builds a relationship with the students and establishes an atmosphere of trust she does not have a concern with classroom management throughout the year. She states, "If I don't have a relationship, I can't teach them." She points out that the key to helping students feel that she truly cares about them is that she prays with them and has devotionals with them every day. She has a prayer box in her classroom that students can access. She says:

> Every day we have a devotional time after lunch. I use stories; I use it as a read-aloud time. I might take a devotional story from Josh McDowell. He's got some real practical character stories. Or I might take a really good story, Christian stories or character building stories. I do character traits each month so I focus on something on the whole month. This year I did fruit of the Spirit (The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance—Galatians 5:22, 23).

This sense of community is important in motivating her students. Ruth finds that the stronger readers can motivate the other students who struggle with reading. She buys books for her classroom and then shares them with her students before putting them in the reading corner. The students get excited about the new books and want to read them. She also finds read-aloud and shared reading are both important in engaging students in reading. Giving things that stretch her students Ruth finds that students feel proud when they can do something that they do not know they can do. For that reason she gives students easy chapter books instead of picture books early in the year to show them how well they can read.

Recently she took an all-day in-service on *21 Keys* (The Pacific Institute), offered by her district and incorporates many of the ideas she learned into her teaching. The program encourages teachers to use positive comments to motivate and encourage children and increase their persistence in completing tasks (21 keys for performance teaching and learning).

Ruth especially appreciates the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) that originated to increase communication and the exchange of ideas among teachers.

Teachers in the same grade levels gather together four or five times a year for discussions about curriculum or issues directly related to their teaching. Ruth says:

> Meeting at grade level with other teachers is really important for all of us and we found as we have done that we are more in touch with one another. I wouldn't like it to get to a point where we have to observe one another in the classroom. I wouldn't like that. But when we get a block a week to get together and collaborate…I really feel it's worthwhile, it's really productive.

Two years later the PLCs are still in place but they have changed significantly. This year Ruth finds them quite directed and complains that they have become less useful. At the beginning of the year the teachers had to set a goal on what they were going to cover. They began discussing Trevor Calkin's *Power of 10* (2003) math program but soon exhausted the manual. When the group began discussing other issues they got "their hands slapped" by the school administrator and were told they should not have been off track. In the past Ruth found the PLCs valuable. Teachers shared their ideas and learned lessons from each other. Although Ruth loves the idea of PLCs she feels that they are only beneficial if teachers have a wide scope and can discuss many different but relevant issues. She is determined that for the next year the teachers will set goals that will ensure they can talk about meaningful topics. She says:

> In the past you feel really good that you had a chance to talk and be heard and everybody got ideas and everybody shared and sometimes maybe it is off base but you need that too. I don't think it should be so specific that—you should never feel that you are wasting time and that's what ended up happening to us.

For Ruth, one of the issues that she struggled with the most was lack of trust on the part of administrators. She says:

> It all boils down to trust for me. I need to know that I am trusted to do my job professionally. If I am left alone to teach, which is what I was hired for, I will do better in the classroom. I appreciate the input. It's just that I need to know that I am supported and trusted and whether that be in my teaching, my teaching style, with parents and with decisions—whether or not I make mistakes. The best principals I've had are those who let me make mistakes and learn from that and they trust that I will do that, and I guess so often we are overloaded with outside commitments and I don't think administration understands that because they are out of touch with how much is actually happening in the classroom, that we multitask and there are many, many details to take care of and we are flying in 25 different directions and you need to be on top of your game in the classroom. And also make it look easy and look like you're having a great time doing it, and so then if your energy is expended in the classroom, you don't have what it takes to join all these committees outside the classroom and be a part of meetings and things that are not our priority. My time has to be prioritized and respected and I do want input and to be able to help make decisions. But there's only so much of me and I would like to concentrate on my teaching. And be able to read what I need to read to make my room a better room.

Even though Ruth finds teaching all-consuming and demanding, she would not like to do anything else. She still finds joy in teaching.

Mary

Mary, who had been teaching for 20 years when I first met her, grew up on a farm in Northern Alberta in a large family with her mom and dad and six siblings. Because she was one of the younger children in her family there were many books in the home, although there was not a l[illegible] money to buy more. She remembers her parents reading storybooks to her when she was a preschooler but once she began to read they stopped reading to her. Because she lived on a farm she did not have access to a library until she entered elementary school. Once she learned to read Mary was a voracious reader, often reading long into the night under the bedcovers with a flashlight. She loved fantasy books and read the Narnia Series in elementary school and *Lord of the Rings* in junior high. In fact, she would "read anything she could lay her hands on" including the local newspaper.

Learning to read came easily to Mary and soon she was visiting the school library and reading books on her own. She does not remember her grade one teacher at all but she remembers the Dick and Jane basal readers. She was a good reader and she often felt frustrated because the passages were short. She wanted to read on but children were only allowed to read to a certain point and then they had to wait for everyone else to finish. Because of this experience she especially values guided reading and having children work at their instructional reading levels. She identifies with the good readers in her classroom and likes the fact that in guided reading she can offer them longer, more challenging books to read. Another strength of guided reading, according to Mary, is it lets the teacher move students to different levels quickly and efficiently. A group of students may start off at the same level but as kids learn to read some may stay at the same level for a long time while other children may jump to different levels.

She also likes levelled readers and the basal readers with controlled vocabulary. They add words gradually so that children can practice their high frequency words and experience success. She feels it is particularly important when children are just beginning to read.

Mary has strong feelings that some people should never become teachers and gives the illustration of her grade two teacher who had a profound effect on her teaching. Mary was a fidgety student and liked to sit on the edge of her seat. Her grade two teacher constantly came over to her desk and moved her to the middle of the seat. This taught Mary to be more tolerant of children's behaviours and not let small things bother her. If children are fidgety or play with their pencils in her classroom she tends to ignore them as long as they are not hurting or bothering other children. She also makes sure that children are not sitting in their desks too long. She changes activities regularly finding this helps children attend better in class. She says:

> I just do lots of moving. Instead of teaching in their desk, stand up, walk, come over to the carpet. Now stand up and walk to your desk and you can do the work and when you're done at the desk come on over. They are just up and back and forth. They're not really in one spot for longer for say, 10-15 minutes even if they are just moving to another spot to listen over here instead of listening over there. It just gives them a little bit of stretch. It brings it home every time I am at a conference. You start to wiggle and you think I will not do this to my kids.

The rest of Mary's schooling after elementary school was uneventful. She was a good student and made straight A's—this in spite of the fact that math was not a strong subject. She did not get into trouble and nothing else stands out for her.

After high school Mary entered the University of Alberta's B.Ed program (Elementary Route). It was the 1980s and her minor was English language arts. She did not find her university courses particularly helpful to her teaching. She says:

> I would probably have to say that it (university) didn't do a lot to prepare you for teaching. You had curriculum instruction (CI) classes which would probably be the most effective but you can't use those until you've been in a classroom and learn what you need to get from them. It's a vicious circle.

If Mary could change anything about university she would have students visit schools early in the program and simply help out in the classroom. It would give students the opportunity to find out more about grade levels and curriculum demands. More time in the schools would also give university students a chance to take and implement ideas that they learn in their course work. Calling some of the ideas students learn at university, "pie in the sky" ideas, she feels it is important to try and implement them in the classroom and then have the input of experienced teachers. She says, "You take it [idea] in and it doesn't work then you can say why, what would work better and what have I done wrong and it's nice to be able to do that in an atmosphere where you've got full support of a teacher because they can say, you know, what you could have done better". She found her curriculum instruction (CI) courses the most helpful to her teaching but also notes that they were mostly theory and she would have liked to see how to apply the theory by seeing a lesson plan implemented in the classroom by an instructor.

During her practicum Mary was placed first in a grade one classroom and then in a grade two classroom. Mary found her placement in a grade two classroom particularly beneficial and noteworthy. Because she had a minor operation during the school term her practicum was postponed until May and she experienced teaching during "crunch time" leading up to the year-end testing. She had an exceptionally helpful and outstanding cooperating teacher and remembers learning many things from her. She says:

> I really remember how she dealt with kids because she was always fair, explained what she was doing, and that's the one thing I learned that kids don't like to be treated as if they are young. They are people. And so that is the one thing that I did learn because they are important people. And you don't talk down to them. You talk to them as you expect them to act. And then they will.

After finishing university Mary began her first job as a part-time kindergarten teacher. Because she had no experience at the kindergarten level she felt intimidated and began looking for the curriculum guides, quickly finding there were none. Fortunately the other kindergarten teacher began informally mentoring her, giving her suggestions and resources.

After teaching kindergarten for a few years, Mary moved to grade one in the same school. Again, there was a grade one teacher who supported and informally mentored her. She found one of the most valuable things the other grade one teacher did was help her understand where other students should be during different times of the year. For the same reason she values the *First Steps* continua because they give guidelines of where students should be in their development as readers and writers. Mary also values the fact that the mentor teacher did not tell her what to do but was always ready to discuss ideas, problems, and issues in the classroom.

The year was 1988 and although whole language was just coming into her school district, Mary began teaching the school year with the basal reading series, *Mr. Mugs*. She still remembers children enjoying the character of *Mr. Mugs* and the success of stories about his character. Although the school district was instituting whole language they did not have the books for the first part of the year. Later in the year she began to use the *Impressions* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston) reading series which she still uses as part of her program, almost twenty years later. She uses the series to demonstrate different parts of stories, to instruct students in phonics and writing, and to teach guided reading lessons.

During those whole language days Mary continued to teach spelling as well as phonics as part of her program. The impetus for this was a visit to another school in the district. As Mary viewed the bulletin displays she noticed that children's work was full of spelling errors. At that point she made up her mind to teach spelling to her students.

Mary begins the school year with basic phonics instruction. The children coming into grade one usually know their letters and sounds because of their kindergarten experience. She teaches children to decode and encode words using phonics. She quickly adds high frequency words to the program, using 80 words high frequency words suggested by *First Steps*. Mary displays the words on a word wall and gives her students five words a week to learn. The spelling program is quickly individualized because if children get words wrong they are added to the next week's word list. Later in the year Mary will often add frequently misspelled words to a child's word list.

Mary also teaches the use of context clues in reading. She finds that as she progresses through the year this becomes more and more important and phonics becomes less critical in learning to read. Because children learn differently she uses all three cueing systems to teach reading. She relates her experience with one student who was weak in phonics and sight word recognition but uses context clues to get the meaning out of the text. She tends to teach comprehension strategies right from the beginning of the year. She says, "I have gotten to the point that I really focus on comprehension right at the beginning of the year. When they read a sentence, stop and get a picture in your mind".

Mary defines reading as "the ability to decipher and to understand because it is all about understanding more than anything else". She does not equate fluency with comprehension, finding that some children read fluently but do not understand what they are reading. Comprehension is a vital part of Mary's guided reading program. Students have to do a retell or recap for every book they read in guided reading and during reading group activities during the year. She groups stronger students with weaker students and has them work together to retell a book, which she then puts together as a class book. She also teaches comprehension strategies such as visualization. Mary says, "I really work on the comprehension. This year I really focused on the comprehension and I saw a huge increase [in children's ability to comprehend text]. I was really pleased." She goes on to say, "I started doing this about two years ago because my son had problems with comprehension and I took him to a summer reading program and that's what she said, visualize, get the picture in your mind and so I started doing this with my grade one's". Mary often talks with her students about the things good readers do and displays them on a chart in her room. These include pre-reading, re-reading, and monitoring for meaning. She is always careful to encourage children on what they are doing right. She says:

> What we did is put up a chart of all the things kids need to do to read well. What do you need to do? The kids gave me all these ideas. You need to be able to read loud so you can hear, not too loud…not too soft. you need to look at the words, you need to be able to sound them out, your reading should sound like talking…when you do a new story together as a class…and before they read it on their own we'll talk about the more difficult words and what's happening in the story—pre-read it—and then they try to read it on their own, Then, we'll read it together and then they'll read it with a partner back and forth. And I'll say I want you to find two things that that person has done well from the chart so you can give them a pat on the back. Then I tell them one thing that they need to work on but first I want to give them two things they've done right.

One of the *Reading Recovery* teachers that she has worked with also taught her to get the students to verbalize what they are doing. That way they internalize and remember strategies that work for them. She finds that when children have the basics—letter sounds, phonemes, and high frequency words that the "light bulb" eventually goes on and they can read. Some of her students have not made the connection between the sight word on the word card and the same word on the pages of the book and she needs to point it out to them. Some children simply need more encouragement especially those who realize they are far behind the others. She says, "It's more about what you feel you can do". For that reason she spends extra time during independent reading with those who struggle, building up their self-confidence. She finds that these students need a great deal of support to read because it is difficult for them. Mary says, "I sit with them, I work with them one-on-one and I encourage them a lot. Usually the reason they don't want to do it is because it's too difficult. And they think they can't and so I pull whatever time I can during silent reading or sit by their desk."

Guided reading is an important part of Mary's program and she has spent the past few years learning more about it. The Reading Recovery teacher in her school had several books on guided reading that she shared with Mary. Mary likes to have conversations with her students about reading. After she listens to children read she tries to find out the decoding strategies that work best for them. She does not tell them a word that they are having difficulty decoding but does give them support and strategies to figure it out.

Unfortunately, Mary does not have the leveled books that she needs to fully implement the program. She uses basal readers such as *Impressions* during her guided reading sessions but since she has only six copies of each reader this does not always work well. She likes to have the students go to their desks after a session and reread the story and answer comprehension questions with a parent volunteer but this is not possible when she needs the same readers for her next group. Instead the children have to answer the questions without rereading the text.

Mary has children work at centers once a week while she leads guided reading with a group of students. Two parent volunteers supervise the students at the literacy centers. The centers consisted of writing, phonics, computers, literacy—all work centers; although she admits that at the beginning of the year she has a few play centers to help students make the transition from kindergarten to grade one. Mary rotates the centers during the year but always includes a computer center. Most of the time Mary groups the centers according to ability but at other times she has helpers who come and work with her weaker students or she groups stronger readers with weaker readers (peer tutoring). Another parent volunteer works with students immediately after their guided reading lesson with Mary and does a recapping or retelling exercise to help students with comprehension. Mary finds that she needs the parent support during literacy centers or she cannot concentrate on the students that she is working with in guided reading. She finds that grade one students are quite ego-centric and not used to sharing. She explains her expectations for student behavior during center time throughout the year but especially at the beginning of the year.

Mary uses the *First Steps* writing resource and its components to teach writing in her classroom. She likes the fact that *First Steps* breaks down the writing process and teaches it in stages. *First Steps* begins in kindergarten by introducing an oral “retell” so that by grade one students can write their own retell. In a retell students first listen to or read a story and then tell the story in their own words. Retelling not only informs the teacher of the students’ comprehension but also reinforces the vocabulary, story structure, and imagery of the story. Students learn to attend to the important details of the story and develop strategies to organize their thinking.

In previous years the particular writing form taught in a particular year was organized at the school level. That is, teachers in each grade concentrated on a particular writing genre and taught that genre for a whole year. Children eventually learned to write all the major genres but it took several years. Mary explains:

> What we had with our school—we broke it up…In grade one you focus more on narrative and retells and the next year you focus on research so that it was all covered over the four years. It made me more aware and I write more [with the children].

Since then, even though *First Steps* is no longer officially used in the district, Mary continues to use the *First Steps* resources for writing instruction. She wonders if the reason teachers stopped using *First Steps* was the lack of time to assimilate it. The instructions of the program began with writing, then spelling and finally reading. The teachers were trying to incorporate the writing portion into their classroom instruction when spelling was added. Mary claims that teachers needed the materials and the time to think and to digest and implement the program. Because the teachers did not have the time or the resources the "push" became too much for them, leading to the program being abandoned.

Following the *First Steps* writing program she teaches all the purposes for writing—including letter writing, recount or retell, and creative story writing. She has children write a minimum of three times a week, sometimes more. Mary uses the *First Steps* resource book to teach writing. Using interactive writing she talks to children as she writes asking them to give her input. For example, after she reads a fairy tale she will compose one with the children asking them to describe the good and bad characters. She breaks down the writing process into writing a beginning, middle, and end. The children begin their story by drawing a picture of the setting of the story and this helps them organize their thoughts and write the story.

Because Mary thinks students need to see that reading and writing are important she usually does a unit in November on animals, which is something that all students enjoy. The students choose an animal, read books to gather information, and write a report. She explains:

> Some of the books are fairly easy and some of the kids can read them. And some of the books are more difficult so I have to help them with it. But I say, 'by the time you are done grade one I bet you'll be able to read this.' This gives them the incentive, especially the boys, who aren't into the stories so much. One of the reading series has a story about butterflies and then it has an informational story. It's kind of neat because you can write a report, even though it's a simple report. Once you show them what they can do, what they can learn.

The students in Mary's class write in their journals regularly. She finds that once they are used to them it is an easy way to fill in time with a worthwhile activity and students are often prepared to write something. Mary will often show them the journals part way through the year as a way of encouraging them. She points out how far they have come in their writing.

In addition to *First Steps* Mary adds other ideas and programs to her teaching portfolio. These new programs include ideas presented by a teacher in a nearby community who has in-serviced many of the teachers in the district. Although she attended the in-service she has decided not to use the program. The teacher suggests starting a writing project with key words and then adding words to the key words to create a sentence. Mary finds that the program lacks imagination. This became evident to her this year when she looked at the writing assessments her district did at the end of this year. One teacher who used this method with her students produced student writing that Mary felt were stilted while Mary's students wrote creative and inventive stories. This has given her great incentive to continue using the *First Steps* resource books for her writing program.

Another thing she does is dictate a story to her students which they write at their desks. During this she incorporates many of her lessons on phonics, punctuation, sentence structure, and spelling of high frequency words. Children usually try to predict the next words and she likes this because they are learning about story structure.

Mary teaches proof-reading by writing a paragraph on the board and having children find the mistakes. Children proof-read each other's writing because most children have difficulty finding their own spelling and punctuation mistakes. Mary does not edit their journals for mistakes but she does use their writing to talk about spelling. As Mary rotates through the class as children are writing she stops, finds a misspelled word in a child's writing, and talks about spelling rules with that child. The child then writes the correct spelling above the word. This lets the child flip back through their journal and find the spelling for the word when they need to use the word again. This is a strategy that she learned through her *First Steps* training and Mary finds it effective.

It was evident right away when talking with Mary that she enjoyed teaching and is fond of the children she teaches. She says, "It's a great age group because they change so much from the beginning of the year. You see a terrific amount of growth. You know, even within the first two or three months—huge". Mary has a strong, nurturing relationship with her students. She says:

> I'm not a harsh person, I'm not really strict. If there's a problem I'll pull them [children] out. I tend to try and work with them instead of ruling over them because if they are afraid of me they are not going to do well. They have to be able to come up and talk to me and there are so many kids the really quiet and shy kids and if I were to be like that to them it would be like the recess scenario—they would get so worried. A lot of the kids tend to be afraid. If you have someone who is very aggressive you just have to take him out and deal with him.

One of the most important things that Mary values about *First Steps* is that *it* has taught her to assess children and their progress in reading and writing. She has also learned to teach to what children need in order to become more competent in reading and writing. For this reason the continua in the resource books are a big part of her program.

Mary seeks to create an atmosphere where students feel safe and sees this as an important contributor to children's progress in school. At the beginning of the school year, she tries to talk briefly with each child, welcoming them all to the class. She concentrates on making the students in her classroom comfortable. She says:

> The first thing I focus on—my big focus that first day of school is relaxing the kids. That's the first thing, to make them comfortable. I've had way too many kids especially the kids that come in mid year that are so worried about their friends and if they are going to have someone to play with and what they are going to do if they don't. They are worried about recess. It sounds so bizarre to an adult but if they are worried about recess they don't learn all day."

Mary does not see herself as a strong disciplinarian. She allows students to move around and interact with other students. She says:

> I like to have a certain amount of discipline but I have to tell you that I know there are some classrooms in our school you can walk through and you can hear a pin drop. That's not my classroom. There's a lot of movement, the kids know what to do when they're finished. I try to mark their work immediately so they get instant feedback and that causes a little bit of time, of unsettled time.

Recently, Mary took a course called *21 Keys* which emphasizes a positive approach to teaching and learning. Incorporating many of these ideas into her teaching, she finds them particularly useful when she is working with students who struggle in reading. From the program she learned to make specific comments on what students can do rather than on what they cannot do. She also has conversations with children on reading and reading strategies. She says, "If they have problems, whether they are real or conceived in their minds, it's still a problem because obviously then they can't get past it".

Mary is against using extrinsic rewards because she says, "They're not doing it for themselves; they're doing it for something. In the classroom what I'm looking to do is motivate them with the fact that they have done a good job, that they've learned so much". She finds that intrinsic motivation such as verbal praise works much better than extrinsic rewards.

Realizing how important it is to work with parents, Mary regularly communicated with parents through newsletters, phone calls, meetings, and parent teacher interviews. Mary says:

> Right at the beginning of the year we have a meeting—how things are working, expectations. And then we have a newsletter that goes out each month and it gives

> them the high frequency words and the curriculum and what we are going to be doing next month. We send as much as we can and if someone is having lots of difficulty I like to talk to them [parents] that first month. When the kids start the home reading program I'll phone the kids and let the parents know that kids are bringing home their books and I have a sheet in there explaining it.

Because she considers home reading books such an important part of her program, Mary spent her own money for home reading when the school did not have the money to buy them. Unfortunately, she had only enough money to buy six books at each level and quickly found that this was not enough. She plans to buy more books for next year. She is careful to note that the books she sends home with the students are at the students' independent reading level. She does not want the parents to teach reading but to practice reading. Mary says:

> Because I don't want parents teaching them to read. They [students] should know what to do. All they [parents] are doing is listening. All the kids are doing is practicing. And I never give them books that are too difficult, I'd rather give them books that are too easy. I'll tell the parents that the books should be easy. You don't want them too difficult because then you are going to be doing the teaching. And they are not going to want to be learning. They are done with school, they just want to practice a bit and put it away.

Mary accommodates student differences by using leveled books for both reading instruction and home reading. She models both reading (decoding, comprehension, and fluency) and writing strategies.

Finding that all students benefit from helping each other, Mary uses peer tutoring in her classroom as a means of meeting the needs of her students. Students enjoy helping each other and some of her students come and ask if they can help someone. The experience often creates friendships in the classroom and competent students learn what they are doing right. She explains:

> I try to group them [stronger readers] with weaker readers so they're teaching each other. Then you are challenging them a bit plus and the higher readers can help somebody else and they are learning. And they do and that's what I find when they are helping somebody even if it is a lower level for them or something that they want to do, it's still helps them because its focusing on—its pulling out of yourself what you are doing right.

In addition, Mary has five or six grade five students come into the classroom once a week and test individual students on their five word wall words. Grade five students also listen to struggling children read during silent reading time so that these struggling students are reading to someone at least once a day. Parent volunteers also come and read regularly with struggling readers. Mary says, "We have reading pals. We have parents that are volunteers in the school who are willing to have students read to them. I had two students who really struggled and they got to choose a book at their level and so they would get pulled for 10-15 minutes every third day and go out and read." Mary also has two parents who come in every Friday to supervise the literacy centers. Mary gives the parents specific tasks which might include giving children word wall words practice, comprehension exercises, or literacy games.

Although Mary believes a number of reasons exist why she does not meet the literacy needs of all her students, one of her greatest concerns is the age that students enter grade one. Mary says:

> I would love to see it [the age students enter grade one] moved back. Right now it is the end of February. I would love it to be minimum, the end of December. We have had the odd little girl who is a January baby and they will do fine but I don't know that it would hurt to hold them back. I don't think that I have ever had a boy who is a January or February boy who has done well. Generally those kids get held back in kindergarten but there are parents who say why we don't put them in grade one and see how they do.

The kindergarten teacher in Mary's school retains students if she feels they are not mature enough to handle grade one. Mary feels that the real problem is that younger children are more immature and not ready for school. She says:

> They're just not ready to sit down and learn. If they don't have any help at home they are better off spending two years in grade one. I don't know what I would do if I lost the ability to say to a parent you really should keep them back because I would feel bad sending some of those kids on to grade two. They can't read—they can't function in grade two.

Sometimes Mary retains students for a second year, but only if they are immature. In the past she retained two boys because they had not attended kindergarten and were far behind the other students and she found they fit in better with the younger group of students. These children might feel a bit uncomfortable at the beginning of the year but she quickly assigns them as her helpers and this helps with their self-esteem.

Mary notes the importance of children's phonological awareness in learning to read. Students' abilities to learn to read are impacted by their ability to hear and articulate the sounds. She is quick to voice her need for the support of speech pathologists and the services that they provided. Unfortunately, in their school district too few speech pathologists service the district. Mary is frustrated by this, emphasizing that teachers need the speech support for children with both articulation and language delays. She says, "So many of these students can't pronounce the sounds properly and the answer that comes back is that it is age appropriate. That doesn't help a lot. To say it's age appropriate, it simply means that most kids do it but that doesn't help. Because you need to teach those sounds so they can read."

Mary, acknowledging the presence of gender differences in students learning to read sees this is a huge concern. Differences include "how they learn, what they learn, what their interest is." She finds girls tend to be stronger in Language Arts than boys. Mary clarified this point saying,

> First of all, the girls for the most part, tend to take in more and take learning to read more seriously than the boys. The boys want to learn but when we are teaching a lesson there are sometimes more important things happening. And they don't put the importance that the girls do and later on in the day when they are having trouble, they see that they should have been listening better and they will ask for the help.

The *Impressions* basal series that she has been using with her class has both narrative and informational stories and Mary likes it for that reason. The girls are fond of narrative stories and the boys prefer informational ones. In fact the teachers feel that school is more suited to girls. Mary says, "Boys are more frisky. School is not fit for boys."

Since Mary is always looking for more ideas to inform her teaching practice she enjoys the professional development offered by her school and district. She recognized the importance of professional development for improving her practice whether through self-reflection, specific professional development sessions, or teacher collaboration. She has taken several in-services recently included one on guided reading (a big focus for her), *21 Keys* as well as a writing in-service offered by a district teacher. She especially values teacher collaboration, which is the result of the AISI project in their district.

In her planning Mary follows the program of studies but only loosely because she understands what her kids need. She closely observes her students, looks for problem areas and then plans her lessons based on her observations. Some parts of her reading program are done regularly. For example, students have a guided reading lesson every week, write at least three times a week, and work on their individual spelling programs. Mary reads aloud and incorporates silent reading into each day.

Mary also has problems with the amount of curriculum she is required to teach in grade one. She declares, "I think there is too much. The expectations on those grade ones are just incredible." For that reason Mary would like to see computer instruction left until grade four. She says,

> I don't use them [computers] much because I don't think they're relevant to kids. There are some programs that we have dealing with letter sounds, comprehension, but honestly in grade one they don't use computers, their curriculum is so full with language arts, their math…they could do that all day.

Recently, the school moved the computer room and was late in ordering some computer programs, including a keyboarding program and so many of the children in Mary's school were without computers for eight months.

Mary lets children read stories on the computer but she finds she could do the same thing, in less time, with books. She taught them some skills such as backspacing, deleting, spell checking, cutting and pasting—skills that children do not come to school with even though they might play a great deal of games on the computer. But she doesn't actually teach keyboarding skills because her students' hands are so small that they cannot reach the keys. She does show them the general area of each alphabet letter. Because it takes so much time to lay the foundational skills and because most of the children in grade one are just learning to read and write, she doesn't find that children actually do much writing on the computer. The librarian takes her class for one computer period a week and the children work on programs where they practice their math facts and phonic skills. She finds that while this is okay they could easily do without it.

Mary admits that she does not use the computer much aside from making up worksheets for school and for email. She finds that her own three teenage children are expected to have access to a computer and the Internet and use the computer to research topics for school.

Because she works in a rural area with most people having dial-up for their Internet access, computers don't seem to be as important to people as to those who live in the city. Most of her students play games on the computer. She thinks it may take time away from doing homework and she will not allow her students to play games on the computer in school. She finds that if she cancels computers for some reason children don't seem to miss it. She says, "You know what I gave my kids for end of year presents and they were all enthralled and flipped and they were in heaven; a book".

Mary plans to continue teaching in the years to come. She looks forward to getting new guided reading books for the next year and to buying more books for her home reading program. She continues to be optimistic about her future as a teacher.

In the next chapter of the dissertation I again revisit my original questions in light of my research to see if they have been adequately answered. I look at the teachers' understandings and instructional practices and compare them to Brian Cambourne's Conditions for learning. I briefly examine the teachers' concerns, provide recommendations for the teaching community and give suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH

This chapter presents the findings of the study, considers their implications for education practice, and makes suggestions for areas for further research. The findings are presented in relation to the three research questions.

1. What instructional elements do experienced teachers believe are necessary for the successful teaching of reading?

Many of the instructional elements of the participants' reading programs were taken from *First Steps,* a balanced literacy program developed in Western Australia. It was not surprising that these teachers incorporated many of the components of *First Steps* into their teaching because all the teachers in the study were educated in the use of the resource books and developmental continua. The teachers valued the *First Steps* resources and found them especially useful for teaching guided reading, writing, and spelling.

The teachers believed a language and print rich environment was necessary in their classrooms as a part of teaching children to read. According to the teachers, they covered their walls with print, word walls, posters, and students' work. They believed in engaging their students in conversations on literacy and gave their students opportunities to listen to books on tape. The teachers believed in giving their students opportunities to read independently every day. All three teachers indicated that they had classroom libraries which children could access throughout the day as well as during independent reading. Aware of the differences in reading interests between boys and girls, the teachers worked at finding books that drew boys into reading. According to the teachers, they ran a home reading program where students took home books at their independent reading level. The teachers also believed in reading to children every day from a range of literature. This reading took the form of read-aloud or shared reading. During this time, students had opportunities to share background knowledge, make predictions, and participate in conversations about texts and ideas.

The teachers believed that comprehension strategies must be taught directly and all three teachers spent time teaching comprehension strategies during guided reading and in reading groups using basal readers. During guided reading, the teachers felt it was important to hold conversations with their students about the things good readers do, such as visualizing the text and monitoring their reading. Literacy centres were used to reinforce reading strategies they taught during the guided reading lessons. All three teachers agreed that reading fluency was not a strong indicator of reading comprehension. They found that some children could read fluently but did not understand the text, while other children read slowly, word by word and yet they demonstrated good understanding of the text.

The teachers believed in instructing children in decoding strategies using phonics, word families, and high frequency words. The teachers liked to spend time specifically on decoding and encoding strategies during spelling and word study activities. Mary and Hanna both used the word wall to teach approximately 80 high frequency words over the course of the year. Ruth's students used "have-a-go pads" during writing assignments. They helped students to be more fluent and creative in their writing because students were not overly focused on spelling while they were composing. Ruth found that these have-a-go pads increased students' self-esteem because they allowed students to become more independent and permitted students to ask for help quietly and therefore, privately.

All the participants believed there is a strong reading-writing connection. They agreed that if students are strong readers they are generally strong writers. However, the two teachers teaching younger students felt that their stronger readers were weaker in creativity. Ruth found that this was not true for her older students.

The teachers believed in teaching writing skills and appreciated and used the *First Steps Writing Resource Book* (1994e). Mary liked the fact that *First Steps* broke down the writing process and taught it in stages. The teachers liked to teach writing, editing, and revising skills through interactive writing and modeled writing. According to the teachers, they modeled writing in whole class and small group demonstrations. Once they had modeled the writing in a specific genre, they often invited their students to "share the pen" and compose a piece of writing together. After a teacher demonstration, the students wrote compositions either individually and in small groups. The teachers liked to move about their classrooms supporting the students by conferencing with them and further reinforcing the students' editing and revising skills. Children shared their writing on a volunteer basis in large and small groups.

The teachers believed it was important to use children's books as springboards for writing. They appreciated the patterns and good quality of writing in children's books and found they gave support and direction to children learning to write.

All three teachers believed in the value of journal writing to supplement their writing program. Mary employed journals to teach writing skills such as paragraphing or high frequency words. Hanna did not like to edit the students' journals but she utilized them to teach various writing forms such as retelling or report writing.

2. What do experienced teachers believe constitutes a necessary environment for the teaching of reading in primary grade classrooms?

I have chosen to use Cambourne's "Conditions for Literacy Learning" to explain the beliefs and practices of the teachers in this study. I believe that teaching is more than implementing a program and includes the behaviors and processes of the students in the classroom. Accessing Cambourne's Conditions for Learning made it possible for me to examine the principles my participants used in their classrooms that created a culture of learning. Cambourne (1988), after observing the language development of young children, set out eight Conditions for Literacy Learning or concrete ways to enhance children's literacy development. Cambourne cites eight principles—immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, use (employment), approximations, and response—from a social constructivist viewpoint. These conditions set the stage for children becoming independent problem solvers.

The teachers in this study believed in creating many of these conditions for learning in their classrooms, thereby promoting and developing a classroom community of literacy learners. Underlying these eight conditions is the premise that learning is an active rather than passive process. The eight conditions are described below.

Immersion

The "Condition of Immersion" emphasizes the importance of students being immersed in literacy or as Cambourne writes, "flooded by, steeped in, saturated by, and enveloped in" literature (Cambourne, 1988, p. 185). The teachers in this study believed in providing multiple opportunities for students to experience print and text. According to the teachers, they filled their classroom walls with posters, displays of children's work, labels, and word walls. They liked to provide time for learners to immerse themselves both visually and aurally in print and text. They believed in giving children time to read independently, to listen to books on tape, and to discuss books and the ideas books generated. By reading to their students during read-aloud and shared reading, they saturated them with the rhythms and sounds of written language.

According to the teachers, they collected books (at their own expense) and provided a class library of different genres of books (poetry, biographies, fiction, and information). Aware of the differences between the interests of boys and of girls, they collected books that appealed to both sexes. They were conscious that the children in their classrooms were reading at different levels and so they liked to provide leveled books for home reading so all children could experience success.

Demonstration

According to Cambourne (1988), demonstrations are "artefacts and/or actions from which we can learn" (p. 47). He writes that classrooms need to provide a "smorgasbord of contextually relevant demonstrations" (p. 50). These demonstrations need to be continually repeated and must be demonstrations of "language wholes". That is these demonstrations must give the learners enough information so they can make sense of the information and engage in the learning.

The teachers believed in using read-alouds and shared reading to demonstrate and talk about what good readers do in order to understand text. This included setting a purpose for reading, predicting what might happen in a story, making connections to background knowledge, asking questions, and using picture cues. As the teachers read they demonstrated decoding strategies and reading fluency.

The teachers believed in demonstrating good writing by thinking aloud as they wrote a letter, paragraph, or short story. Shared writing involves demonstrating writing through shared experiences and is a constructive, step-by-step method of modeling the processes of writing. According to the teachers, they talked as they modeled writing, telling their students the reasons why they were using particular words or sentence conventions. In interactive writing, the teachers shared the pen with their students encouraging them to write pieces of the composition. In this way, the teachers scaffolded the students' writing, assisting them with correct form and composition. The teachers liked to integrate other subject areas into language arts. They taught students to organize and increase their knowledge of key subjects as they engaged in the writing process.

All three teachers reported that they used popular children's books as patterns for students' writing. These children's books provided powerful models of sentence structure, word usage, and story form. These demonstrations helped children to learn to write effectively and creatively.

Engagement

Cambourne (1995) states that student engagement is the key to success in literacy learning. According to Cambourne, no matter how much immersion or how many demonstrations are provided, learning will not occur without engagement. Children will engage in demonstrations if they believe the demonstrations have value, if they believe they are capable of doing what is being demonstrated, and if they believe the risks of learning are "sufferable". As learners respect, admire, and trust the demonstrator, they want to be more like the more capable other (Cambourne, 1995). Engagement in learning to read involves having a clear purpose, taking responsibility for learning, and seeing oneself as a potential reader.

Cambourne (1988) makes the point that the probability of engagement is increased if "the demonstrations are given by a person with whom the learner has bonded" (p. 53). According to the teachers, they spent considerable time at the beginning of the year making personal and individual connections with each student.

All three participants believed in making reading and writing a central component of the curriculum and of the school day. They understood the importance of drawing students into reading and writing by making them active participants in their learning as they talked, shared, explored, and played. They thought it was important to communicate to their students during the first days of school that the students were capable of learning to read and write. All three teachers believed in regularly read to their students and in doing so conveyed the idea that reading is both important and enjoyable. By giving children genuine writing tasks early in the year, such as writing a report on their favorite animal, Mary shared the idea that writing has power and meaning. Ruth liked to give books to her students that stretched them and showed them they were capable of reading chapter books when they might have thought otherwise.

The teachers reported that their students were involved in reading and writing tasks throughout the day. Mary felt many of her grade one students came into school already desiring to learn to read and she tried to maintain that positive attitude in her classroom, reinforcing the idea that they would eventually learn to read independently.

Hanna collected humorous books such as those by Robert Munsch and the Clifford (Bridwell) books she knew children would enjoy. She believed the key to engagement was creating an atmosphere where students felt comfortable and safe. Ruth felt that sharing her own reading experiences with her students drew them into reading.

Cambourne (1988) states engagement is not the same as motivation but has "overtones of motivation" (p. 52). In other words, children must believe that learning to read and write will "further the purpose of their [the students'] lives" (p. 52). Mary did believe in using extrinsic rewards for reading accomplishments because, "They're [students] not doing it for themselves; they're doing it for something". Instead, she helped children focus on the fact that they had done a good job and they had learned something.

Mary believed in spending extra time with struggling students during silent reading because she found these students needed a great deal of encouragement to read because it was difficult for them. Mary said, "I sit with them, I work with them one-on-one, and I encourage them a lot." Cambourne (1988) notes that potential learners will not engage in the learning unless they believe they are potential "doers" of the learning.

Expectations

Cambourne (1995) states, "Expectations are essential messages that significant others communicate to learners. They are also subtle and powerful coercers of behavior" (p. 185). Expectations are connected with "the confidence that a teacher consistently displays in her learners' abilities to be ultimately successful in whatever they are trying to master" (1988, p. 57). Cambourne (1988) insists that teachers need to know their students so that their expectations at the individual level are valid.

At the beginning of the year, the three teachers in this study thought it was important to set out expectations for their students in terms of academic progress. Mary said many children came into grade one expecting to learn to read right away and she reinforced the idea that they could and would learn to read. Throughout the school day, the teachers believed in the importance and power of reading and the expectation that children would demonstrate their learning in different ways. Mary liked to encourage self-efficacy by reminding students how much they had learned during the year. Later in the year, she invited them to read their writing from earlier in the year and then compared it to their present writing. The teachers understood the importance of setting clear goals and expectations on the first day and reviewed them on a regular basis. They expected children to succeed and provided individual support when necessary.

To encourage the "Condition of Expectations", Cambourne (1988) states that teachers need to convey to their students the idea that learning to read and write is relevant, useful, and worthwhile. As the teachers set aside large amounts of time for reading, students came to understand that reading was important. During read-aloud or shared reading the teachers thought it was important to make purposeful comments to communicate to their students that reading was a way of finding out information and providing enjoyment. As students wrote on a regular basis they began to understand that they were expected to be writers. They took on the roles of writer—gathering information, learning the different genres, and learning to write for meaning.

Responsibility

Children who take responsibility for their learning feel they have control over their ability to learn. If this control is taken away children have no investment in the process of learning and become ineffective learners (Cambourne, 2001b). When teachers act as 'dispensers of knowledge' they hold the responsibility for children's learning. As students are exposed to demonstrations of literate behavior, they begin to choose what they will "try out" or explore. The children become responsible for their learning by exercising choices, making decisions, and setting goals. The teachers thought it was important to give choices to their students that encouraged them to take responsibility or ownership for their learning. The teachers believed that by giving their students choices, they encouraged them to express their individual differences. As these teachers gave responsibility to their students they encouraged them to take steps in their learning journey.

The teachers believed that with the "Condition of Responsibility" the children were given many opportunities to make learning decisions requiring more complex thinking. For example, Ruth sometimes implemented literature circles where students took on different response roles. Mary created literacy centres where children learned to make decisions about learning. For the teachers in this study, the Condition of Responsibility meant that they were not always able to pre-plan and program a common set of learning tasks or activities. Instead, the teachers said they responded to the needs of their students and were prepared to make different demonstrations to different students at different times.

Approximations

Cambourne (1995) suggests that children need to take risks, to test out hypotheses, and make approximations as they learn. These attempts at learning or "having-a-go" are important and natural (Cambourne, 2001a). Children should be encouraged to take risks because learning from mistakes is an important part of learning.

Calling it one of the most important things they did, the teachers in this study believed in providing a safe and caring atmosphere where children could take risks in their learning. According to Cambourne (1988), a focus on relationships helps to develop the classroom community, a necessary element for risk-taking. By establishing a classroom environment where children could take chances and interact with others, the teachers created a learning community where students supported and encouraged one another. Because of this atmosphere students were more likely to take risks and come closer to their mastery of literate behaviors.

Mary felt one of the biggest obstacles to children learning to read was the lack of self-confidence and so she spent time building students' confidence. The students made approximations when they made predictions during reading activities, answered questions, and responded to texts through journal writing, conversations, and literature circles. The "have-a-go" pads also provided students with low risk opportunities to make approximations in learning to spell words. When Mary listened to children read she did not like to give them the answers but encouraged them to try and figure out words or self-correct their miscues.

Use (Employment)

Cambourne (1988) writes about the importance of giving opportunities to the learners to "play around with" or put into effect the hypotheses on which they are working (p. 70). Learners need multiple opportunities to apply their developing skills and understandings about literacy in authentic and meaningful ways (Cambourne, 2001a).

After being exposed to many models and demonstrations of both reading and writing, the students applied their skills and reflected their understanding about the processes of reading and writing.

All three teachers believed in providing time for journal writing where students could write about what they knew. In addition, the teachers liked to provide time during the day for silent reading—shifting the responsibility for reading to the children. As the students grew in responsibility they became more independent in small groups, in literacy centres, and during individual work assignments.

The teachers in the study believed in providing time and opportunities during the school day to explore materials, ideas, and concepts and to practice skills. The teachers liked to provide their students with adequate time to employ what had been demonstrated in various settings. They not only felt it was necessary to read to their students, they liked to give students the opportunity to read independently, in pairs, and in small groups. To support weaker readers, the teachers believed in enlisting the help of peer and parent tutors who read with these students during the school day. According to the teachers, they provided their students with leveled texts to ensure they continued to read at home at their independent reading level.

According to the teachers, they demonstrated various writing genres in modeled writing and gave children the opportunity to practice the writing form. Students had blocks of time to think about and develop their ideas in writing. Mary also liked to give opportunities through literacy centres where students worked together on reading and writing tasks. Ruth reported that she held literature circles in her classroom, where students met in groups to discuss, write, and present their ideas on a book they had all elected to read.

Response

Cambourne (1995) suggests that it is critical for all learners to receive feedback from an outside, knowledgeable, significant other and that the response be "relevant, appropriate, timely, readily available, with no strings attached" (p. 33). Teachers need to provide opportunities for their students to develop and improve their approximations and receive cues about how effective readers create meaning (Cambourne, 2001a). According to Cambourne (1988), teachers must respond to children's hypotheses, approximations, and focus their attention on demonstrations that help children modify their learning.

My participants reported that they observed the students in their classes and then used the *First Steps Developmental Continua* to map out strategies they could use to meet their students' individual needs. All the teachers maintained that they examined their students' writing to help them plan lessons. Mary said, "That's what the First Steps teaches us that…especially in writing…if you see a problem or if you see an area of need, teach to it". Ruth saw "kid watching" as the cornerstone of her program and planned demonstrations from the observations she made of each child's progress. She liked to provide rubrics when she was teaching a writing genre so she could give clear expectations and immediate feedback.

In an effort to be responsive to her students, Hanna refused to plan her lessons far ahead of time, preferring to respond to the immediate needs and interests of the children. She tracked her students' writing progress through their journal writing and then conferenced with children about their development as writers. Mary said she invited her students to sit on the carpet during independent reading so she could listen to individuals read and then give them input and direction.

Realizing they could not meet all the needs of their students, the teachers believed in orchestrating interactions with significant others (peer and parent tutors). Mary found the stronger and weaker readers liked to interact during reading time and this interaction created friendships in the classroom. According to Ruth, she had "reading pals" read with her weaker students or help them with comprehension questions from a guided reading lesson.

3. What issues/concerns related to the teaching of reading were identified by these experienced teachers of reading?

The teachers identified several issues and concerns related to teaching and the successful accomplishment of their jobs.

- Pre-service Teacher Education: The teachers in this study did not find their pre-service teacher education classes particularly relevant or helpful. All three teachers would have preferred more experiences with children and more practical information. The participants in the study viewed their student teaching as the most important part of their teacher education program. They cited their mentor teachers as providing important contributions to their development as teachers.
- The Importance of Professional Development and Collaboration. The teachers in the study valued the professional development they had been involved in, and especially the collaborative component, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Outside of the collaborative meetings, all three teachers met other teachers informally and shared their ideas and insights. The teachers also collected and used teacher resource books.

The teachers regularly attended in-service sessions and the yearly teachers' convention. They understood the tremendous benefits of pursuing professional development for both themselves and their students. Ruth valued the in-school in-services more than the district ones because she found them more useful and less prescribed. Like many other teachers, the teachers in this study continued to search for programs and ideas that could help them become more effective in their classrooms.

- Time for Teachers to Collaborate: The teachers in this study worked in a school district which designated Alberta Initiatives for School Improvement (AISI) funding towards teacher collaboration or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). All the teachers mentioned the importance of the time provided by the school district for collaboration.
- The Importance of Mentoring for Beginning Teachers: All three teachers in this study felt the most important factor in helping them to become successful teachers was not their university course work or student teaching, but the support and collaboration of other more experienced teachers in their schools when they began teaching. Their "mentor teachers" shared resources and books and spent time with them discussing classroom organization, instructional strategies, and discipline problems.
- Support from School Administrators: Competence and trust are nurtured in an environment or community where collaboration is the central focus. The teachers felt that administrators need to become skilful in providing a safe atmosphere where teachers will be unafraid to take risks in their teaching and will incorporate the latest research-based practices into their teaching. By providing this atmosphere in the

school, principals set a positive tone in their schools and encourage teachers to do the same in their classrooms.

- Sufficient Resources for the Classroom: The teacher participants in this study complained they did not have sufficient books in their classrooms to effectively teach children to read. The teachers felt they needed a large number of levelled books to successfully run guided reading groups, an important part of the reading program. The teachers recognized that although funding is dedicated to technology resources in schools, their students also needed an increased number of books that could engage them during independent reading.
- Technology Integration: The teachers questioned the value of computer use for young children. Ruth wondered about the impact of computers on children's abilities to focus in school. She also believed children are sitting at a computer instead of getting the physical exercise they need to stay fit and healthy. On the other hand, they felt that computers could make it easier to meet the individual needs of children.
- Support from Speech Pathologists in the School System: The teachers felt that more speech support was needed for those students who struggled with articulation or expressive and receptive language delays. This is strongly supported by research on the importance of phonemic awareness (the ability to hear language sounds) in learning to read. The lack of speech and language intervention is problematic in light of research that states that young students with speech and language difficulties are at risk for later literacy problems (Bird, Bishop & Freeman, 1995; Snowling, Bishop, & Stothard, 2000).

- Readiness for Learning: The teachers in this study were concerned that some children in their classrooms, particularly boys, were neither socially nor emotionally ready for school. They made the distinction between those who lagged behind socially and those who were delayed academically or cognitively. Special needs children were integrated into their classrooms and the teachers differentiated their instruction to meet the needs of these students. Although Reading Recovery teachers further supported struggling students in grade one, both grade one teachers in this study have occasionally retained young students. They found that these students fit in well with the younger classmates made good progress the following school year.
- Curricular Demands: The participants in this study felt curriculum content needs to be reduced especially for the primary grades. The teachers argued the early school years should be devoted to reading, writing, and math skills. The teachers all strongly believed that children need to learn basic skills in reading, writing, and keyboarding before computer instruction can be effective and valuable. They struggled to cover all the subjects in the curriculum and often made the decision to make reading and math their priorities.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Tapping teachers' practical professional knowledge and perspectives about reading instruction: Elementary school literacy teachers possess specific practical knowledge and skills: knowledge of reading instruction, classroom management, organizational skills, and communication abilities. Continued research is needed that further investigates literacy teachers' perspectives on the teaching and learning of literacy skills.

2. Professional Development: More research is needed on the benefits of teacher professional development and its effect on students' reading and writing. In many other professions numerous opportunities present themselves for workers to increase their knowledge and skills. This also needs to be a priority in the area of education. Snow, Griffin, and Burns (2005) acknowledge that we do not have the research base on teacher professional development; we need—"a convergent program of research in which content and method in teacher preparation or professional development programs have been manipulated, and accompanying changes in teacher knowledge, teacher behaviour, and child outcomes charted" (p. 2).

Final Thoughts

Although research in reading provides valuable insights into reading processes, we also need to understand the art of teaching, which includes the ways teachers motivate students, organize and deliver their instruction, and create an atmosphere conducive to learning. Research based instruction needs qualified, thinking, motivated teachers to implement it. Teaching is not an easy task. As the research into reading instruction continues to increase, teachers need not only to know about changes but implement them in their classrooms. This is a complex process that requires teachers to assimilate knowledge of the reading process, and to execute it in the classrooms, taking into account the needs and interests of twenty or more students. It is one thing to learn a concept, technique, or important skill but its implementation demands deep understanding and knowledge. Teachers also need to develop critical insight into the needs, interests, and characteristics of the students in their classrooms. They must be able to break down complex ideas into simple steps, all the while keeping children engaged, interested, and motivated.

As I read and study the research on reading instruction, the more I am convinced that a critical component in children becoming successful, capable readers is the competence and dispositions of classroom teachers. This has implications for the ways universities develop and deliver relevant, up-to-date pre-service teacher education programs. It suggests that school boards must look for ways of providing professional development that is both current and comprehensive. It indicates that school administrators need to provide classroom and library resources, time for teacher collaboration, and support from professionals such as speech pathologists. And it means that provincial governments must re-examine curriculum to make sure it is both manageable and relevant.

This research study has provided me with a tremendous opportunity to work with three dedicated and committed teachers. Their willingness to share their experiences and insights in order to help others understand what is needed for effective reading instruction is both motivating and inspiring. As I listened to these teachers, the more convinced I became of the importance and value of communication between teachers and teacher educators.

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